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Representations of Domestic Workers in Modern Arabic Fiction

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

by

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August 2019  
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## Abstract

In this study, I have examined the representations of domestic workers in a number of Arabic mid-century and contemporary novels, using feminism and intersectionality as my overarching framework. I employed several scholarships of feminism such as Marxist and postcolonial feminism to examine the discourse on working-class women. The initial assumption of this study is that there is a noticeable invisibility of domestic workers in Arabic novels. If these characters manage to find their way into a text, they are typically ahistorical figures whose subjectivity is not centered.

Among the Arabic novels I have examined, I found that the tradition of underrepresenting domestic workers appears in iconic texts of the mid-century. In Naguib Mahfouz' *Trilogy*, domestic workers function as either signs of class, subaltern figures, or loyal servants. In *The Open Door* of Latifa al-Zayyat and *Sha'rawi's Muthakkirat* of Huda Sha'rawi, working-class characters are used as the others who emphasize the superiority of upper and middle-class communities. In contemporary novels, however, this tradition no longer seems to be the norm; domestic workers are given more space in the narrative. The new generation of Arab writers tackles more issues related to marginalized groups, such as slavery, anti-Black racism, and sexuality. Most of these texts speak to the notion of intersectionality that calls for the examination of representations of women from multiple dimensions of oppression. *Al-Bahriyyat* by Omima Alkhamis and *Wojhat al-Bawsala* by Noura al-Ghamdi, for instance, tackle the matter of slavery as a multi-faceted form of oppression that involves gender, class, and color rather than one-dimensional oppression be it patriarchy or color alone. I also find that contemporary novels such as Najwa Bin Shatwan's *Zarayib al-'Abeed* and Samar Yazbek's *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* provide distinctive narrative regarding interracial and cross-class relationships. Such relationships are

perceived in these texts as a means of class mobility and empowerment for working-class female characters. Nevertheless, dominant stereotypes of domestic workers are still popular as shown in some texts such as Ali Badr's *Papa Sartre* and Fatiha Murshid's *Almulhimaat*.

Key words: Modern Arabic literature, Domestic workers, Intersectionality, Gender, Marxist feminism, Postcolonial feminism, Slavery, anti-Black racism, Sexuality.

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And, to my US family, Zaid, Alshaatha, Ketaki, Aditi, and Nikhil, and all the friends who make the life away from home such a joyful and unforgettable experience.

And finally, to Sara – sadly, I do not recall her original Indonesian name. The woman who facilitated my life and took care of my family during a stage of hardship and struggle.

## **Dedication**

To Abdulla and Yazan, for being the most patient, supportive, and responsible human beings,  
just like their late father.

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## **Introduction**

On March of 2017, a viral video on social media sites sparked controversy in the Arab region. An Ethiopian domestic worker in Kuwait is shown to be hanging from a balcony, screaming for help, while the Kuwaiti woman employer was recording the video and shouting: “You crazy woman, come back,” without offering to extend her hands for help. Several seconds into the video, the worker falls from the seventh floor balcony and miraculously lands on metal sheets and survives while the employer is still recording. The video brought the issue of domestic workers to the focus of local and social media, and people were mostly outraged by such inhumane treatment. The employer claimed in later reports that the worker was attempting to commit suicide, so she recorded the incident and posted it on social media in order to prove her innocence if she were to be accused of any wrongdoing. The worker, on the other hand, claimed that she was escaping from the employer who was trying to kill her in the bathroom out of sight. This video is just the tip of the iceberg, as the dominant narrative in the Arabic-speaking world deals with domestic workers as second-class human beings and depicts them as villains who deserve no sympathy. Any random online search will bombard users with links and titles about crimes committed by domestic workers. Titles such as “Maid attempts to behead three-year-old boy in Saudi Arabia,” “A mother is stabbed to death, children and maid are injured in early morning in UAE,” and “An Ethiopian maid attacks a pregnant woman and kills unborn child in Lebanon” are very common and likely to shape the public opinion towards domestic workers.

The phenomenon of female domestic workers is not a new phenomenon in modern Arab societies. They have always been a prominent element of the social structure and a significant component of its dynamics. Women domestic servants existed as slaves and concubines until recently in the Arabic-speaking world. Slavery in modern history is not confined to the West;

indeed, many parts of the world with distinctive socio-economic structures have witnessed their own histories of slave trades and the use of enslaved people in many types of forced labor. A relatively small state like Oman, for instance, has a long history of slavery during and after its rule in Zanzibar especially around the time between 1698 and 1856. Slavery remained legal in Oman until 1970 (Urkevich qtd. in. Plackett), and it was around that time when slavery ended in most of the states in the Arabian Peninsula (Sabbagh). In many Arab states, slavery was officially abolished but continued to be a practice even after its abolishment. In Egypt, for instance, slavery was abolished in 1877 – as an agreement between Britain and Egypt. However, it lasted as a practice for decades (Muneer). Moreover, anti-slavery international reports indicate that slavery still exists in some Arab states such as Sudan and Mauritania (Widman).

Besides slavery, other forms of underpaid domestic labor exist in the Arabic-speaking world. Upper and middle-class families typically have access to domestic help. They used to hire poor local women to serve in their houses. However, a major shift has occurred since the last quarter of the twentieth century regarding domestic work as a result of economic and social changes and the effects of globalization and multinational capitalism. Domestic workers became mainly migrants who cross continents and move from poorer to richer countries with job contracts for paid domestic work. In areas where the economy boomed, such as the Arab Gulf oil states (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman), homes were filled with domestic workers coming from several poor Asian and African countries. The Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Kenya are among the countries that provides the major supplies of domestic workers. Statistics indicate that the number of migrant domestic workers in some of these countries has exceeded the number of family members as indicated in the UAE (Vlieger 51). The globalization and commodification of

domestic labor, and the regulations, legislative problems that accompanied this process, have led to global attention to the conditions of such migrant domestic workers. Many studies state that this population lives in inhumane conditions and refer to their status as modern-day slavery (Vlieger 404).

In this dissertation, I will focus on representations of female domestic workers in modern Arabic novels after 2000. My aim is to shed light on the depictions of different forms of female domestic workers: enslaved women and local domestic workers. What distinguishes the treatment of each of these groups within the literary discourse? There are two major patterns of representations of female domestic workers: the victim and the demon. What drives these alterations within the relations of power in the narrative? Further, the study will investigate what narrative techniques (functions, spatial, polyphonic or autonomous voices) are used to create these fictional characters. Are these characters always fixed and flat characters who are linked to their fictional subjectivity as servants, or do they have other roles and subjectivities in the narrative? Considering the agency and authority of writing, do the texts give a voice to these characters in the narrative, or do they remain silent and subaltern?

The project will also examine the social structure, social reproduction, division of labor, and relations of power through the dynamics between characters of the narratives. Factors such as color and class will come under focus throughout the analysis. I argue here that the depiction of domestic workers in Arabic novels provides an exemplary illustration of intersectionality. The oppression suffered by these figures is not limited to one factor such as gender, class, or ethnicity. Rather, it is a multilayered oppression that cuts across all these factors alongside others such as nationality, language, and religion. Moreover, the majority of these novels depict several aspects of struggle, and perhaps the most striking of which is the oppression practiced by

privileged women against the underprivileged. The analysis of these texts will require a multi-axis framework to understand the relationships and the factors that govern the sphere of domestic work in the narratives.

In the following parts of this introduction, I will provide a literature review of the current studies on the topic of domestic workers in literary and non-literary fields, discuss the reasons for choosing the novels, and the time frame for this project, as well as address some challenges. I will also elaborate on the theories that will be utilized for the analysis; explain some of the key terms and concepts in this dissertation; and provide an outline of the chapters with brief details about the main themes in each chapter.

## 1. Current Scholarship

Studies on the subject of domestic work in the Arab region can be divided into two categories: literary studies and non-literary studies. By literary studies, I mean scholarly texts that analyze works of literature such as novels and short stories. The non-literary studies are varied and belong to various fields of knowledge, ranging from sociological, economic, cultural, anthropological, and demographical works, to transnational, global, and human rights studies. I will provide a general survey of English and Arabic non-literary studies. These studies will only be used for finding relative pieces of information such as statistics, historical background, and other supporting documents for the analysis.

Most of the non-literary studies in English are often concerned with issues regarding female migrant domestic workers from legal, socioeconomic, and human right perspectives. Some of the titles here are Simel Esim and Monica Smith's *Gender and Migration in Arab States: The case of Domestic Workers* (2004). The report tackles issues regarding the situation of migrant female workers and provides extensive information about the regulations and social

rules of domestic labor in four Arab states: Bahrain, Emirates, Lebanon, and Kuwait. Antoinette Vlieger's *Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates* (2013) is a socio-legal study dedicated to investigating the inside lives and conditions of female domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and Emirates. The author discusses the subject of domestic labor in these two states in terms of legal, religious and cultural aspects. She addresses the particularity of these two oil-wealthy states through a theoretical frame of petropolitics. In other words, Vlieger examines the effects of the oil-boom on the relationships between local and migrant populations, the legislation of labor, and the changes of the rules of domestic labor. Another study in this list is Ray Jureidini and Nayla Moukarbel's "Female Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Case of 'Contract Slavery'?" (2004), which deals with the topic from the perspective of transnational feminism. It tackles issues of the feminization of international migration and trafficking in human labor. It argues that employment relations and social status of these women leave them extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Investigating legal and social conditions, the authors argue that most of Sri Lankan domestic workers fall under the category of 'contract slavery'.

More scholarly works on the history of slavery in the Arab and Muslim world are available in English. Most of these books tackle issues of race, gender and social life regarding slavery in the nineteenth century. For example, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* by Terence Walz and Kenneth M. Cuno is a collection of articles that discuss slavery in Egypt and Sudan during the nineteenth century, military slavery during the ruling of Muhammad Ali Pasha, as well as issues relating to social life and personal stories of enslaved people in the Middle East. Similar to this book is the collection of Hohn Hunwick and Eve Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Land of Islam* which tackles issues of Muslim views on slavery; slave trade

and markets; military; agricultural; and domestic slavery. The collection also includes articles that discuss the subjects of the end of slavery, abolition, and the post-slavery era. Throughout the collection, the authors reflect on Islamic views and how they influence these situations and issues related to slavery. These books provide the materials and information for contextualization purposes.

The Arabic non-literary studies, on the other hand, seem to deal with the subject from a different point of view. With few exceptions, local academic writings, especially from the region of the Arabian Gulf, propose that the female domestic worker presents a threat to the economy and the stability of the families as well as the identity of these societies. Most of these texts emphasize the negative impact of foreign domestic workers on children, their language and social relations, as well as the role of these domestic workers in abusing Islamic values by spreading adultery and health hazards. Several academic studies discuss problems caused by the tendency of local women to depend on domestic workers to give up their roles as mothers and housewives to these “strangers,” and attempt to provide some solutions to this phenomenon. Furthermore, the anti-foreigners rhetoric becomes overtly xenophobic when discussing issues of security and demographic changes, especially in countries like the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait where the numbers of migrant workers are estimated to outnumber the citizens. One can barely find any texts, except for international human rights reports and few writings of some anti-mainstream intellectuals, that discuss difficulties encountered by these workers or condemn their ill-treatment and abuse. This is apart from discussing their integral role in the development of these societies and helping local women to seek their own independence or even enjoy their luxury lives. To mention some of these studies, we can name Muhammad Al-Monjed’s *Dangers Threatening Homes* (n. d.) which professes from its title its anti-foreigner rhetoric, and Khalid

Al-Zikri's *The Impact of Foreign Maids on Social Interaction within Families (As Seen by Saudi Families in Riyadh City)* (2005) which argues that the presence of foreign domestic workers damages local families' relationship and affects the upbringing of their children. Close to this study is the essay "Foreign Nannies in Arabian Gulf Homes" (1986) by Ebrahim Khalifa. This essay is also loaded with hostility against foreign domestic workers, claiming that they cause many social and ethical problems and have affected the economy of the Gulf communities.

On the list of literary studies, very few texts, if any, were written about the theme of female domestic workers in Arabic literature. This scarcity can be read as a signifier of which texts and topics are considered to be important for Arab critics and what is not. One of the few books that I found on this theme is Abdelfattah Sabri's *Expatriate Labor and its Impact on the UAE Literature* (2008), which is geographically limited to the UAE and only discusses the genre of short stories. Furthermore, this study focuses on general expatriate experience, while my study will focus on female domestic workers in particular. Sabri's book is mainly a discursive analysis that seems to be motivated, like other studies on the topic, by racial and national motivations and not by aesthetic or critical considerations. The author builds his analysis based on the assumption that migrant workers pose more threats than benefits, especially in terms of unbalancing the demographic structure. The author also claims that the presence of migrant workers has negative effects on the social, economic, linguistic, and cultural aspect of the country. Therefore, the author claims the task of raising the awareness of local people and encourages them to preserve the "purity" of their culture and the identity of their homeland, as he puts it (27). The temporal frame of the literary texts in this book is not specified. However, the author mentions that he traces the foreign workers' representations in the Emirati stories starting from its earliest



appearance in the 1970's – the time of the drastic economic changes, the oil boom, and the massive migration of foreigner workers to the country – until the present.

Other literary analyses about domestic workers mostly include English and American literary texts. To take one example, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (1986) by Bruce Robbins attempts to investigate the history of the English literature concerning working classes. Robbins proposes that there is a gap in representing working class groups in the English literature of the nineteenth century. These groups, he claims, are largely comprised of domestic servants mainly represented by authors who are alienated from the experience of these servants. Thus, he attempts to make historical sense of the literary representation of domestic servants in English literature. Furthermore, the author argues that most of the texts he studies implicate a strong sense of resistance to the social injustice and they aspire towards a utopian future and social transformation, especially when servants take over the narrative or become the tellers of the story. Robbins' study is complex, unique, sophisticated, and loaded with philosophical insights. However, the author does not make clarifications regarding the approaches he utilizes, which can be disrupting to readers of different backgrounds. And although this book can be an exemplary model for my project, it is not based in feminist thought nor does it pay any particular attention to the aspect of gender, which is crucial to my work.

This survey reveals the scarcity of literary critical analyses about domestic workers within Arabic literature, and shows some of the ideological obstacles such as the anti-foreigner rhetoric in the Arabic-language commercially published books. There is also a lack of a strong theoretical foundation in analyzing literary texts. These reviewed texts, however, can be useful to reveal the social and political pre-conceived assumptions about domestic workers.

## 2. Purpose, Limits, and Scope

The scope of this research is contemporary Arabic novels written by female and male writers after 2000 that depict marginalized groups of female domestic workers such as enslaved women, local female servants, and foreign domestic workers. One reason for choosing this contemporary era is to cover a shortage in critical analysis of newer novels which did not garner enough attention from scholars. Choosing post 2000's novels in specific is to examine ways in which the new generation of Arab writers responds to political, social, and economic transformations in the Arab region including armed conflicts, social movements, and the information revolution of the internet and social media. Regarding the representations of domestic workers, this study attempts to investigate how these representations have developed in the narrative over time, what roles in the narrative these characters are given, and whether political, socio-economic, and generational transformations influence the literary treatment of these groups. For this purpose, an examination of some exemplary mid-century Arabic literary texts will be necessary in order to examine if and how these changes exist. Thus, before analyzing contemporary novels, I will start with canonical Arabic novel such as those of Naguib Mahfouz.

According to Arab critics such as Faisal Darraj and Said Yaqtin, Arabic novelists of the new millennium seem to have lost hope in the national project and politics of the Arab regimes and moved away from focusing on grand narratives and national discourses in traditional postcolonial texts. There is a general orientation among the new generation of Arab writers to focus on individualism, existentialist questions, and concerns of daily life. As part of this new shift, more Arab writers have started depicting narratives of minorities and the marginalized characters, keeping up with the social transformations and developments in global human rights

discourse. The representation of domestic workers in Arabic novels is also a response by Arab writers toward the increased presence of migrant domestic workers in some Arab regions such as the Gulf States and Lebanon in the decades preceding the 2000's.

However, the abundance of literary works about marginalized groups was not met by an abundance of literary criticism on the topic. My research will narrow this gap in Arabic literary criticism. Many Arab feminist critiques, especially those influenced by Eurocentric white feminism, build upon the assumption that patriarchal hegemony in Arab societies is the main, if not the only, factor of social injustice among genders. This assumption has been challenged in postcolonial, Black, and Marxist feminisms. These trends object to white feminists' presumption of homogenizing "Third World" women and representing them all as victims of patriarchy. Non-white feminist scholarships propose, instead, the notion of intersectionality and multilayered oppression, and suggest that neither women's sources of oppression nor their degree of oppression are identical. Thus, my research will step away from Eurocentric feminist criticism and instead utilize a multi-axis analysis of women's oppression.

Some of the challenges facing this study is the scarcity of scholarly, academic research that tackles such a topic in this specificity in Arabic literature and criticism. There is also a lack of a coherent theoretical understanding and application of concepts such as Marxist feminism, postcolonial feminism, and intersectionality within the Arabic context. This lack leaves many Arab scholars with no choice but to apply theories that were formalized in a context other than the Arab world to Arabic texts. With this in mind, I will include several Arabic scholars as needed in my analysis in order to avoid a total dependence on non-Arabic critical theories.

### 3. Theoretical Tools

This project will apply different features and intersections of feminism such as Marxist feminism, postcolonial feminism, and intersectionality to examine the social struggle/relations and the representations of female domestic workers in the modern Arabic novel, and to illustrate that the oppression of these women is multifaceted and overlapping. Analyzing multiple forms of oppression using a singular method, such as gender, race or class, is insufficient. Therefore, I propose to use a multi-axis method that will provide a comprehensive analysis of these texts. Some of the critics whose theories I will use are Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Nawal El Saadawi, and Kimberle Crenshaw.

To begin with, Marxist feminism was one of the interdisciplinary approaches that emerged from the second wave of feminism between 1960s and the 1970s. It aims to expand Marxist analysis of class to include the history of women's oppression and their relations to the mode of production. It can be defined as "a practice or theory which considers both gender and class to be essential components of an analysis," aiming to extend Marxist analysis of class "to describe the material basis of women's subjugation, and the relationship between the modes of production and women's status, and to apply theories of women and class to the role of the family" (Mills, qtd in Tijani 5). Like many other male theorists, Marx underestimates women's experiences and roles, so it became the main task for Marxist feminism to further complicate the relations of economy and gender. The approach relies on Marx's model of "base/ superstructure" of societies to illustrate that gender differences are purely economic, rather than natural or anatomical. Marx suggests that the social relations, the means, and the forces of production constitute the economic base of a particular society, and this base, in turn, determines the ideological superstructure (Clarke 1). One of the fundamental texts in Marxist feminism is

Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family*, which argues that the move to private property includes a shift from matriarchy to patriarchy and was the beginning for women's subordination and suppression ("Marxist Feminism"). Marxist feminists assert that despite the undeniable biological differences, patriarchy is rooted in the economic system, and that men historically owned the means of production, whereas women have only their labor. Thus, men and women are historically differentiated based on their relations to the means of production (Clarke 1). Marxist feminist focuses on problems that face women in the workplace such as the gender division of labor, women's underpayment, unpaid household and childcare work, and the commodification of women's bodies for sexual, reproductive and entertainment purposes ("Marxist Feminism"). In this project, I will mostly utilize the Althusserian concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to analyze the imaginary social relations between lower/upper-class individuals, domestic workers/employers, and how the characters in the literary texts are either performing these imaginary roles or rebelling against them. Marxist feminism will mostly be used to analyze texts that deal with a localized social relation in terms of local lower-class female domestic workers working for upper-class women and families who are from the same racial/ethnic/national identity.

In the same manner that Marxist feminism operates in this liminal space, postcolonial feminism complicates the concerns of both postcolonialism and feminism by emphasizing that women's oppression in colonized and formerly colonized countries is multifaceted and multilayered – it is not a result of colonialism or sexism separately, but it is at the intersection of both kinds of oppression. They both aim to deconstruct the binarism that results in the othering and marginalizing a group of people while privileging another group based on racial, cultural, and gender differences. The discourses of feminism and postcolonialism separately demonstrate

striking similarities and parallels, but they rarely intersect. Postcolonial feminism is situated in that intersection (Ashcroft et. al 249). On the one hand, postcolonial feminism critiques postcolonial theory for being a male-centered theory and for ignoring the question of gender. On the other, postcolonial feminism critiques feminist theory for being a Western-centered theory and not acknowledging the struggles of the women in colonized regions. Chandra Mohanty's thoughts on the Western representations of "Third World" women will be taken into account, especially her call for examining women's images within their contexts and avoiding generalization and homogenization when dealing with women's issues. Gayatri Spivak's notion of the 'subaltern' will also be utilized to analyze the representation of domestic workers as subalterns in multiple texts.

These critical lenses are most important in analyzing the thematic aspect of the works that I will be dealing with. Analyzing the structural and technical aspect of these works will require a different methodologies such as structuralism and narratology. Structuralist narratology identifies two basic elements of all stories: the story, *what* is being said, or the semantic structure that existed independent of any medium, and the discourse, *how* it is being said, or the verbal or non-verbal presentation of this structure ("Narratology"). Roland Barthes' structural guide to narrative and the reader-response theory will be employed to investigate the phenomenon of domestic workers' absence or marginalization in Arabic novels. I will, as well, use the concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin such as polyphony and heteroglossia, which examine the multiplicity of voices as well as speeches within the narrative, besides focusing on elements of space and the functionality of characters. The utilization of such structural concepts stems from the belief that the narrative form is not an arbitrary element, rather it enhances the content and contains many significations. Therefore, a combination of discourse analysis (Marxist feminism, postcolonial

feminism, intersectionality) with a structural analysis (narratology) will assist to provide a coherent understanding of these works.

#### 4. Key Terms

Some of the terms this study will use are: “female domestic workers,” “maids,” “servants,” “*jariya*,” (s.) “*jawari*” (pl.) and “enslaved female.” While analyzing Arabic literary texts from different regions, cultures, and periods, the study will distinguish between these terms according to the particular meaning the text implicates, for these terms have different implications in Arabic due to periodic and regional differences. “Domestic worker” is the key term that will be used in this study. It generally refers to an individual, migrant or non-migrant, male or female, live-in or live-out worker, who works within the employer’s household and performs services that vary from child and elderly dependent care, to cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the household (Vlieger 30). It is linked to a modern form of domestic labor and refers to an employee who has a fixed-term contract and monthly salary. However, the term in Arabic is still uncommon and relatively new. It is mostly used by some government administrations, as well as international media and human rights organizations, and some progressive intellectuals. Mainstream Arabic-language media, recruitment agencies, and ordinary people, on the other hand, use words such as “maid,” (f.) “servants,” or “workers”. The term for servant in standard Arabic is “*khadim*” (m.) or “*khadimah*” (f.), whereas in colloquial Arabic, different forms of the word in the feminine “*khaddamah*” or “*shaghala*” are used to mean “maid”. These last two forms are more common in Egypt, Lebanon, and the Gulf states, and they are considered degrading in many cultures. The dominant word in the analyzed texts, however, is “maid” or “servant.” Thus, I will use these last words only when referring to texts that use them, whereas the term “domestic worker” will be used while employing theories or conducting an

analysis. The term “domestic worker” in this study refers particularly to female (migrant or non-migrant) live-in domestic workers in modern periods. Male domestic workers who often work as drivers, chiefs, gardeners... etc. will not be the focus of this study.

In the novels that I am investigating, the terms “*jawari*” or *jariya*” (s.) are used to reference young enslaved female domestic workers, although the term itself has more complex connotations than the simplistic treatment in the novels. *Jawari* and concubines are part of a larger juristic system of “*milk alyamin*,” or “owned by the right hand,” that aims to regulate familial, marriage, and social laws. In the Umayyad and Abbasid period, the term *jariya* was used to refer more specifically to a slave courtesan whether she is old or young (Hammond). *Jawari* were often talented enslaved women who were selected and given an appropriate education that enabled them to perform poetry in courthouses (Myrne 52). Thus, they belonged to the same branch of enslaved females as the slave singers and the *qiyan*. Both *jawari* and *qiyan* were also sometimes concubines who were kept for the sexual pleasure of the masters especially among elite and urban classes (Myrne 52). Some *jawari*, nevertheless, had a prominent status in these historical contexts, where the mothers of nearly all Abbasid caliphs and Shite *Imams* were concubines (Gordon 4). Although slavery and concubinage systems are no longer existent in modern Arab states, there are still many references to these categories in contemporary works of literature.

## 5. Brief Chapter Outlines

The first chapter of this project is a literary survey of the representations of domestic workers in iconic literature of the mid-century Arabic fiction. The chapter will include an analysis of three iconic Arabic novels: Naguib Mahfouz’s *al-Thulathiyya* (1956-1957) (*The Cairo Trilogy*- 1990), Latifa al-Zayyat’s *al-Bab al-Maftuh* (1960) (*The Open Door*-2000), and Huda



Sha'rawi's *Muthakkirat Huda Sha'rawi*-1981. These texts are canonized by the critics as well as by popular reception. While Sha'rawi's memories do not necessarily hold that status, her figure does – her name is a household word for Arab feminism in the Arabic-speaking world. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a literary background to contemporary novels in the following chapters by looking at the nature of the dominant stereotypes of domestic workers in iconic Arabic fiction and how they develop over time. The focus in this chapter will be on the noticeable phenomenon of the absence and marginality of domestic workers in Arabic novels of the mid-century as well as the treatment of domestic workers when they appear in the narrative. I will attempt to answer the question of this absence and discuss its significations. Such a task of reading between the lines and questioning the unsayable in the narrative requires utilizing additional methods regarding the structure of the narrative. Ronald Barthes' structural theory of the narrative and the reader-response theory can provide a tool for such analysis. I will also track the literary depiction of social forces and their relations, without disregarding the patterns of social values that govern the dynamics between characters. The notion of subaltern and other concepts of body politics and performative roles will also be used to examine these representations. The main themes of this chapter will be domestic workers as signs of wealth, the unheard subaltern, the loyal servant, class tensions between upper and lower-class female characters, and class body politics regarding these two groups.

The second and third chapters will focus on representations of domestic workers in contemporary Arabic fiction after 2000. The selection of texts in these two chapters is not so much concerned with whether the domestic worker is a central or marginal character, as much as it is concerned with social tensions and power hierarchies. Further, I choose to focus on texts that depict the oppression faced by these characters as multilayered (class, race, and gender) instead

of a one-dimensional representation. The second chapter in particular focuses on the subjects of slavery and anti-Black racism in selected contemporary Arabic fiction. The chapter will be divided into three sections: the first section is a sweeping survey of the transformations in Arabic fiction from the period of the mid-century until recent time. I will investigate the factors that led to the shift in this literature from the national discourse toward literature that gives more space to marginal groups and lower-class characters. I will review several assumptions and observations of critics of “Third World” and Arabic literature including Fredric Jameson, Muhsin Musawi, and Faisal Darraj, as well as postcolonial and poststructural feminists such as Chandra Mohanty, Judith Butler, Nawal El Saadawi, and Kimberle Crenshaw in order to understand the increasing tendency in contemporary Arabic novels to represent marginalized groups including domestic workers. The aim of this background is to connect the present to the past and to understand the environment in which events take place in several texts that deal with modern slavery and domestic work.

The second section is a survey of literature that attempts to explore the discourse on modern slavery and anti-Black racism within the Arabic context. This survey explores two subjects: the dearth of Arabic scholarly works on slavery and anti-Black racism, and the relationship between slavery and Blackness in the Arab world. For that purpose, I will also provide a brief historical review to explain Islamic views on slavery and to further trace the roots of anti-Black racism in the Arab world back to pre-Islamic history. Among the scholarly texts to be reviewed in this section is Nader Kazim’s *Representations of the Other*, where he proposes the notion of Africanism “*Istifraq*,” following Said’s notion of *Orientalism* “*Istishraq*,” and investigates the representations of Blacks throughout classical Arabic literature. This survey provides a necessary contextualization that assesses the literary representations and stereotypes

of Black enslaved characters and makes sense of the ambivalent discourse, and sometimes the overt racism, towards Blackness in the novels analyzed in the third section of this chapter.

The analysis in the third section will include four novels: *Al-Bahriyyat (Women of the Sea)* (2006) by Omaima Alkhamis, *Wajhat al-Bawsala (The Direction of the Compass)* (2002) by Noura al-Ghamdi, *Zarayib al-‘Abeed (The Slave Pens)* (2016) by Najwa Bin Shatwan, and *Thaman al-Mulh (Price of the Salt)* (2016) by Khalid al-Bassam. Utilizing the concept of intersectionality, I will tackle themes of slavery and its relations to gender and color within these novels as well as social hierarchies and relations of power among female characters. Further, I will examine whether these characters are given space for some resistance to their assigned roles or represented as submissive victims to their subjectivity, to use the Althusserian term. More aspects of the narrative techniques such as polyphonic and spatial elements will also be discussed to examine how these narrative techniques might affect the way in which these themes are tackled.

The third chapter centers on the sexuality of domestic workers in contemporary Arabic novels with a focus on both enslaved women and local domestic workers. It is also divided into three sections. The first section tackles aspects related to familial and intimate life within the fictional private spheres. I discuss the sexuality of domestic workers as a realm of abuse, intimacy, and social mobility. A brief review of historical and legal issues regarding the sexuality of *jawari* and *qiyān* will also be provided to help understand the legal system of slavery and marriage in Islam, and consequently to understand the references in the texts to these issues. The notion of purity and contamination and how it relates to domestic work is also another significant aspect that will be introduced in this section.

In the second section, I will discuss the three stereotypes regarding domestic workers' sexuality in contemporary Arabic fiction: the seductive whore, the innocent victim, and the asexualized figure, the *dada*. My aim here is to connect and compare these stereotypes to the older representations of literary domestic workers tackled in the first chapter of this study in order to explore the evolving representations. I will trace these stereotypes in two novels: Ali Badr's *Papa Sartre*- 2009, and Fatiha Murshid's *Almulhimaat (The Inspirationalists)* (2011).

The last section in this chapter revolves around sexuality of domestic workers in relation to gender, class, and color. I will examine these intersectional identities within intimate spheres with more attention to the interracial, cross-class and gender dynamics between characters. I will also examine the utopian versus pessimistic visions of domestic workers' sexuality as a tool of empowerment that enables these characters to disturb the social hierarchy and move between classes. *Thaman al-Mulh*, *Zarayib al-Abeed*, and Samar Yazbek's *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* 2007 (*Cinnamon*- 2013) are the main novels in this chapter.

## Chapter I

### The Omitted Object: Domestic Workers in Classic Arabic Fiction

#### Politics of Representation

Every text, after all, is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work. What a problem it would be if a text were to say everything the receiver is to understand - it would never end. (Eco 6)

In his remarkable book *The Servant's Hand*, and while investigating the noticeable absence of domestic workers in English literature of the nineteenth century, Bruce Robbins elucidates that what complicates his effort of making a coherent analysis on the matter of servants' depiction in English literature is not precisely the lack of these characters. Rather, it is the flatness and repetitiveness of the literary servants, and the fact that they reveal so little that is worth investigating by scholars: "Criticism on the subject is like a stroll down an endless gallery of look-alikes: each portrait is the same all-too-loyal retainer, sharing his master's conviction of natural hierarchy and among complaints only at his own somewhat ambiguous place in it" (Robbins 34). These remarks on English literature regarding the depiction of domestic workers can also be valid to modern Arabic fiction, which I am limiting for the purpose of this chapter, to selected novels of the twentieth century that have been regarded as iconic novels in modern Arabic literature. This fiction introduces domestic workers in the same flatness and repetitive manner that is described by Robbins.

Domestic labor is not that much of an attractive subject in Arabic literature. Iconic novels are not concerned with the burden of everyday life and who does the daily chores in households. Domestic workers in this literature are invisible and overlooked. When they find their way between the covers of a novel, they only appear in the margins, excluded from the main narrative and treated as passive subjects who only move in kitchens or front doors. They are mostly extras,

connected to a specific subjectivity as ‘others,’ belonging to an identified group that is judged to be intellectually and morally inferior: “servants.” This subjectivity is linked to their occupation and it becomes an identity in itself that needs no further explanation or justification. Most of these literary domestic workers are ahistorical; they have no background stories, no past and no future. With only few exceptions, these characters are mostly naive, flat, and voiceless, loyal, shadowing their masters and submissive to them as if they are phantom-like figures.

The assumption which this chapter attempts to investigate is that there is a great underrepresentation of domestic workers in iconic Arabic literature. Where they are represented, their subjectivity generally is not centered. Readers of Arabic novels often grasp the feeling that the background is prepared, food is cooked, and clothes are washed. Nevertheless, they do not learn much about the people behind these acts. These acts are always done in a passive tense. We see the trace but not the actors. There are many holes, gaps, and signs of neglect and exclusion regarding domestic workers in this canonical literature.

My aim in this chapter is not only to investigate these gaps in some iconic Arabic fictional texts, but also to read between the lines to find out how these gaps are filled and what functionality do these subjects produce when they exist in the narrative. Further, it is an attempt to track the literary depiction of social forces and their relations, as well as examining the patterns of values and behavioral choices based on social status. I will examine these themes in three Arabic classic texts prior to 2000: Huda Sha’rawi’s memoirs *Muthakkirat Huda Sha’rawi*, that deals with upper-class societies; Naguib Mahfouz’s *The Cairo Trilogy*; and Latifa al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door*, both of which both revolve around middle-class families in Egypt.

# 1. Mahfouz: *The Trilogy*

*Al-Thulathiyya*, known as *The Cairo Trilogy* or *The Trilogy* and comprise of *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (1956; English: *Palace Walk*, 1990), *Qasr al-Shawq* (1957; *Palace of Desire*), and *al-Sukkariya* (1957; *Sugar Street*), by the Egyptian and the Nobel Prize winning writer Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) is a family saga regarded as the best epic novel ever written in Arabic. It gains its regional and international remarkable recognition as a postcolonial novel that vividly depicts social, political, and ideological dilemmas of modern Egypt. *The Trilogy* takes place in one of Cairo's historical neighborhoods, *Jamaliyya*, during the era of the British occupation of Egypt (1914 and 1944) until after the 1952 military coup that overthrew King Farouk. It traces the story of three generations of an Egyptian middling merchant class family headed by the inflexible patriarch Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad. Sayyid, popularly known in the Arabic-speaking-world as "Si-Sayyid/سي السيد," has become an icon and a byword in Arabic popular culture for the authoritarian male domination. He is a dichotomized character who leads a contradictory life, ruling his family with an iron fist while leading a secret hedonist life of excessive pleasures and self-indulgence. Some other characters of the novel are Amina, the submissive wife and devoted mother; Yasin, Abd al-Jawad's son, who is married three times and known to sexually assault women; Fahmi, the eldest son of Amina and the national activist who was martyred young in one of the demonstrations against the British occupation in Egypt; Kamal, the youngest and intellectual son who remains a bachelor and undergoes an existential crisis; Khadija and Aisha, the two daughters who are married off to two old aristocrat brothers who are Pashas. Another character that lives with the family is Umm Hanafi, Amina's maid and assistant, who stays beside Amina until her last days. The second and third volume of *The Trilogy* include more characters from the next generation of Abd al-Jawad's family.

Each volume of *The Trilogy* describes the national and domestic transitions encountered by Abd al-Jawad's old-fashioned middle-class family from one generation to the next. The family reflects the struggle of the traditional Egyptian society in the midst of its intense upheaval. Although Muhammad Ali Pasha, who ruled 1805-1848, is considered the "father of modern Egypt" and ushered many shifts toward modernity during the period spanning the two world wars, when Egypt was inundated by waves of modernity predominantly imposed by the "catalyst of an intrusive alien and materialist civilization advancing from the West" (Le Gassick 3). Mahfouz depicted all of this in his masterpiece.

One aspect of why this novel, and Mahfouz's literary production in general, is celebrated is its representation of various social forces and strata. *The Trilogy* introduces men, women, sex workers, singers, religious men, intellectuals, nationalists, Darwinists, rich and poor individuals all presented with compassion and neutrality as many commentators state (Le Gassick 3). Portrayal of women and their roles in Mahfouz's literature has attracted even more attention from scholars. Criticism of Mahfouz's literary works is disputed regarding his representation of women. Some critics deem him as a women's advocate who sympathizes with them and continuously criticizes patriarchy to the point that they qualify him to be a feminist writer (Oersen 18). In her review on some of Mahfouz's literary texts, including *The Trilogy*, Miriam Cooke proposes that Mahfouz's focus on women characters is part of his larger project that is committed to depict social struggle. She points out the sensitivity that characterized Mahfouz's treatment of women's issues even when he deals with sinful and 'evil' women. She indicates, "In the earlier period, Mahfouz depicts women as transparent symbols of innocence or evil. Yet, even at their most allegorical, these women have a vibrancy and dynamism that many of Mahfouz's men lack. Whereas the innocent good are somewhat uniformly and flatly portrayed,



the evil are colorfully depicted” (Cooke 510). Opposing opinions emerged by feminist scholars such as Nawal El Saadawi, who reckons Mahfouz as no less patriarchal than any other male writer in the literary field. Although she gives Mahfouz credit for his progressive social justice perceptive and compliments him for blaming falls of women on their economic circumstances and not on their evil instinct as is common in literature written by men, she still deems him as merely one more patriarchal author. El Saadawi accuses Mahfouz of what she calls the contradictory discourse on women. She claims that his progressivism did not succeed in ridding him of his rooted patriarchal heritage: “He allows a woman to work and earn in society, and at the same time denies her individual freedom. He permits her to love, yet stigmatizes her for being a fallen woman if she really does. He considers marriage as the only legitimate and permissible relation between a man and a woman, but when a woman thinks in terms of marriage he accuses her of conservatism” (El Saadawi 328).

This engaging debate over women’s representation in Mahfouz’ works is itself an indicator of the abundance of women’s presence in Mahfouz’s narrative. This abundance that leads several scholars to devote their research to analyze these characters of women, especially those characters who are represented in terms of social class. Ibrahim el-Sheikh, for instance, identifies five types of women in Mahfouz’s literature (87): The poor woman; the middle-class woman; the aristocratic woman; the mother; and the new up-to-date woman. El-Sheikh illustrates these categories through several characters of Mahfouz’s novels. But strikingly, none of el-Sheikh’s examples are of a domestic worker. Even when he addresses the poor women, he does not use any domestic worker as an example of this group.

One of the few scholars to address the lack of representation of domestic workers in Mahfouz’s literature is Sheridene Oersen in their study “The representation of women in four of

Naguib Mahfouz's realist novels." Oersen states that Mahfouz "did not pay enough attention" to female characters of domestic workers in *The Trilogy* and hence attempts to analyze these characters of the novel. They propose that the invisibility of these characters (Umm Hanafi and Nur) is a reflection of the plight of the class of these women, meaning, as women of marginal groups, these characters are marginalized in the text too (Oersen 51). Oersen does not provide more analysis beyond this obvious statement.

One justification for which scholars have excluded domestic workers from their analyses of Mahfouz's literature could be that Mahfouz himself did. Stating this, I should clarify that this does not mean characters of domestic workers do not exist or even recur in Mahfouz's work. They do. But these characters are mostly flat: they all look alike; they do not provide active or vivid personas that can provoke any analysis; and they are invisible even in their presence. Some of them appear in more significant roles but they could not exceed the limits of their subjectivity as servants. Yet, although mostly given tenuous roles, these characters are not functionless or free of meanings. We can identify three functions of domestic workers in *The Trilogy*: signs of class, the loyal servant, and the unheard subaltern.

### 1.1 Signs of Class

Many servants in *The Trilogy* appear passively to perform one particular task such as opening doors, receiving guests, delivering news, and serving food or tea, yet in a silent mode and as a ghostly presence. Nearly every household in the three-volume novel holds at least one domestic worker introduced at some point, but they rarely talk or engage with the story's plot, let alone becoming the center of it. Some of them, as a matter of fact, appear in one single scene then disappear from the whole narrative such as Zubayda's maid Jaljal, who appears to serve wine to the guests (*Palace Walk* 98), and Yasmina, the maid of Baheeja, who is seen briefly

opening the door then serving coffee when Yasin visits to propose to Baheeja's daughter (*Palace of Desire* 122). Such a swift and momentary presence indicates an obvious omission of these characters that requires the reader to look beyond the explicit level of the narrative. Questioning the absence, in this case, might produce more meanings and prove that what is unsaid in the text is no less significant than what is said.

While these seemingly invisible characters in *The Trilogy* can simply be seen as non-functional elements of the narrative, or merely extras that many literary works include and rarely attract scholars to consider in any analysis, it would be beneficial to recall works of structuralists such as Roland Barthes who opposes the idea that there could be any excessive or useless elements in the narrative. The structural approach emphasizes that any utterance, unit, or actant – the characters who do the acts – in the story has a functionality of some sort, whether this functionality contributes to the progress of the *story* or to add more connotations and effects to the *discourse* - the way in which the story is told and organized. Structural approach, indeed, provides a convenient perspective to view units of the narrative that seem meaningless such as these marginal domestic workers in *The Trilogy*. In his foundational essay “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” in which he draws a sketch of the frame of narrative, Barthes asks, “Is everything functional in a narrative? Is everything, down to the most minute detail... meaningful?” (244). Barthes demonstrates that every narrative consists solely of functions. He argues that everything in the narrative is significant no matter how trivial it is. This is not, for Barthes, a matter of art, but a matter of structure. According to him, “art does not acknowledge the existence of noise... it is a pure system: there are no wasted units, and there can never be any, however long, loose, or tenuous the threads which link them to one of the levels of the story” (245).

Further, structuralists propose that every narrative is composed of levels of meanings that stand in hierarchical relations to each other. And for a reader to understand a narrative, he/she should recognize a number of “strata” in that narrative rather than only following the unfolding of the story. Barthes clarifies, “To project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative into the implicitly vertical axis; to read a narrative [. . .] is not only to pass from one word to the next, but also from one level to the next [. . .] The meaning does not stop at the end of the narrative, but it straddles it” (Barthes 243). This suggests that we need to investigate the meaning on multiple levels: the functions, the actants, the discourse, etc. Some of which can be followed in the narrative, and others can be recognized through relations with outer contexts. If a narrator informs the reader, for instance, that there is a painting on the wall, then this painting is mentioned for a reason that either will be exposed in one of the narrative sequences or will be left to the reader to analyze in association with other information within the narrative or beyond it, in its outer context. Based on this notion, I claim that the minimal space given to the marginalized domestic workers in *The Trilogy* indicates socio-economic conditions beyond the fictional narrative structure. In order to better understand these conditions, it will not be enough to read the story unfolding. Rather, the reader needs to move between the levels of narrative and read through the socio-economic context that produces these fictional conditions.

Barthes also states that any function in the narrative has a seed-like quality enabling it to sow an element that later can come to maturity in the narrative, whether on the same level or on a different one (244). He suggests that when it comes to the functions, the narrative units are not equally important. Rather, some of them “constitute actual hinges of the narrative [...] others do no more than ‘filling’ the narrative space separating the hinge-type functions” (248). Barthes distinguishes between *cardinal* units of the story that usually refer to a complementary and

consequential act, and *catalyses* units that usually refer to a more or less diffused concept, that calls the reader's attention to the level of the discourse, instead of, say, the level of events and the story (248).

One can follow more segments in Barthes' narrative structure, but the point is to conclude that 1) every single unit in any narrative has a function, 2) that these functions, although not equally important, are necessary to the meaning, and 3) that the meaning can be better achieved through moving between multiple levels of the narrative. Barthes' theorization of reading or decoding messages in a text was further emphasized by other narratologists such as Umberto Eco, who complicated the reader's role in the narrative, assuming that this role is active and productive. In his book, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Eco remarks that every narrative text includes gaps awaiting fulfillment by the reader – that a text cannot say everything about everything, otherwise it is not going to end. Rather, texts give hints, leave gaps, insert signs, and the role of the reader is to gather these clues and reproduce the meaning (3). The reader, for Eco, is part of the process of the meaning making as he/she adds their background and unique perception to the narrative.

The invisibility of domestic workers in *The Trilogy* and in other texts in this study can be better understood under the light of this theorization. Depending on the previous discussion of the determinant functionality of all narrative units, it should be emphasized that these characters are not useless or wasted units no matter how insignificant they seem. Rather, their existence, I argue here, signifies the social dynamics and hierarchies of class within the Egyptian society. Additionally, these connotations become more cohesive when we move through the levels of the narrative and follow the growth of these implanted elements – the silent domestic workers – in order to be able to decode the message behind their passive treatment. Beyond the obvious fact

that the margin space in the narrative is an indicator of the marginality of this community in reality, more functions and significations can be encoded in these marginalized characters in *The Trilogy*. One of these functions is that these characters are meant to be signs of wealth and status. Their appearance itself calls the reader's attention to the social status of their employers.

Clearly, these units are not cardinals or hinge-type units, but they can be counted within Barthes frame as *catalyses*. That is, minor units functioning as indices to call the reader's attention to the social structure that the novel depicts. This functionality is not addressed at any point of the story, but it is cultivated like seeds, in Barthes' words, contributing not to moving the events forward, but to diffusing some hints and providing the narrative with the elements that are necessary in building the fictional world and its own social skeleton. The narrative does not linger or elaborate in explaining the class hierarchy and economic struggle. However, the presence of these characters spares the narrator from explicitly verbalizing such details. Meaning, if the narrator mentions that Abd al-Jawad or any other family in *The Trilogy* has a servant, then this information itself is a signifier of the comfortable position of the family that enables it to afford having a domestic worker. However, the fact that the narrative does not comment on this phenomenon seems like a stronger evidence that a case of a middle-class family without a domestic worker is not even an imaginable situation in any fictional setting that borrows from that certain historical moment of the twentieth century. It is being textualized as one of these situations that we take for granted.

When we link these fictional units with outer context, or when moving from the horizontal to the vertical level, to use Barthes' terms, we find that the frequent passive attendance of these domestic workers can function to connect the reader with the social and historical base of the novel. The novel narrates the story of the twentieth century's Egyptian

middle-class, when this class was still forming and sought to distinguish itself from the poor and acquire an identity as a higher class. Thus, it attempted to imitate the upper-class lifestyle and norms, especially in utilizing laborers and servants' assistance to provide more comfort for families and to show their social status. In fact, middle-class was identified by many sociologists as the "servant-keepers" for their eagerness of having domestic workers. In his study of the socio-economic effects of the industrial revolution on the modern British society and the emerging middle-class, E.J. Hobsbawm remarks that "the widest definition of the middle-class or those who aspired to imitate them was that of keeping domestic servants" (131). Hobsbawm suggests that the Industrial Revolution replaced the servant and work of men by the 'operative' and 'hand,' but this revolution did not make the same effects on the "mainly female" field of domestic work, which led to increasing the number of domestic workers for the benefits of the growing middle-class. Poorer individuals who did not have similar access to means of productions needed such jobs due to the lack of options. The middle-class exploited that situation by hiring more servants "for the safest way of distinguishing oneself from the laborers," Hobsbawm explains, "was to employ labor oneself" (66). Domestic workers in this case became mere signs of money, as Hobsbawm illustrates, since the capitalists who hire them are not making profits. Instead, people who hire servants are spending their profit on these servants to show their wealth, not because they are in real need for the services they provide.

Despite the different circumstances of the rise of middle-class in the Arabic-speaking world from the British situation, as there was no industrial revolution in Egypt or any other Arab country, similar social effects occurred regarding the transformation of classes' lifestyle and norms. As a result of the collapse of the feudal system and the abandonment of older modes of production such as agricultural, fishing, and other crafts, and after the failure of the official plans

to reform agriculture sectors in many Arab states, massive number of individuals moved from rural areas to big cities and were able to become small business owners or obtain official jobs. This group, alongside aristocratic families whose political or economic status had deteriorated, formed the nucleus of the middle-class – upper and lower. In order to maintain a successful life and respected status, these groups attempted to reach, or maintain, the ideal of an individual family. That is, a nuclear self-sufficient family that can afford all its material and moral needs depending on its own resources, together with the comfortable houses, the devoted and modest wives, and the family circle that appreciates art, science and literature (Naqeeb 217-242). As a consequence of this new lifestyle, and a requirement of its needs, the number of domestic workers multiplied among middle-class families to fulfill their aspirations to imitate the upper-classes – or maintain their old lifestyle if they were a downgraded class – and to distinguish themselves from the lower ones.

Utilizing paid domestic labor, in conjunction with demeaning and degrading domestic work, were among the main social norms that was globally inherited by the middle-classes (Anderson 1). Politics of domestic work indicate that an ideal housewife is expected to receive aid in housework as a lady and not to do the actual work herself. She would merely supervise servants and domestic workers and make sure that work is done in full without leaving her hands to the dirty work. This attitude is depicted in *The Trilogy* when Khadija's mother-in-law, who belongs to a former aristocratic, or *Pashas*, family that is currently in the upper middle-class, once shames Khadija for having the morals of servants because she likes to take care of household chores herself. She scornfully tells Khadija, "This is a virtue for maids to brag about, not ladies," in which Khadija replies: "the only vocation you people have is eating and drinking. The true master of a house is the person who takes care of it." The quarrel continues, and the



mother-in-law answers, “if they instilled such ideas in you at home, it was to conceal their opinion that you would never be good for anything except domestic service” (*Palace of Desire* 37). Such a scene shows the dynamic and politics of domestic work among women from different classes and what is expected from them regarding domestic work. The mother in law links domestic labor to lower-class women and hints that women who were raised to do house labors, no matter what class they belong to, are not qualified to be ladies.

Aside from such comments in the narrative that reveal the politics of domestic labor and the common attitude of disregarding it, the narrative does not bother to tell any background story or other information about these invisible figures of domestic workers such as Jaljal, Yasmina and other servants. They swiftly show up to tell the reader some information about their masters and mistresses, about their social status and wealth, and not their own stories. The main function of these characters is to refer to the context of socio-economic and historical conditions of the text.

## 1.2 The Loyal Servant

In the previous section, I stated that domestic workers in *The Trilogy* are predominantly invisible, silent, and underrepresented, and I discussed the significations of their momentary appearance as being used as signs of class and social status. In this section, I aim to focus on the way the narrative treats domestic workers when they actually appear and become hinge-type units in the plot. I argue here that these characters function as an appendage to their masters and mistresses to the point that they can be their doubles. They are permanently loyal servants who devoted themselves to facilitate their masters’ lives. They seem to have no past, no stories, no families, no feelings or problems of their own. *The Trilogy* introduces few domestic workers who

seem to be given more space in the narrative, particularly Umm Hanafi. However, they are still depicted as flat characters who are confined to their jobs as domestic workers.

Umm Hanafi, Amina's housekeeper and right arm, is one of the first characters to be introduced by the omniscient narrator in *The Trilogy*. She appears in the first few pages of *Palace Walk* and remains under the lights until the last pages of *Sugar Street*. She entered her mistress' house early when Amina was a new wife; she witnesses the birth of her children and contributes in their upbringing as well as the upbringing of their children; she mourns the death of the head of the family, Sayyid; and she bitterly awaits for the death of the moribund Amina. She is the ultimate example of the loyal and faithful domestic worker who devotes her life to her mistress.

Umm Hanafi is physically described as "a stout women who was shapeless and formless. The single goal governing her ample increase in flesh had been corpulence. Considerations of beauty had been ignored. She was totally satisfied, for she reckoned corpulence to be beauty of the finest sort" (*Palace Walk* 15). This precise external description seems necessary to create the flat and fixed character, one about whose appearance readers know more than her internal characteristics. One can see, as well, the pattern of the old, unattractive, naive, and foolish servant who functions as the traditional comic relief that appears in many literary and cinematic works in the same era as *The Trilogy* (Shafik 36). Beauty standards during the time of the story, according to the narrative discourse, included fuller-bodied women; such standards were remnants of the influence of the Ottoman culture on the Egyptians taste (Al-Jamal). However, in the case of Umm Hanafi, this feature is depicted as a negative trait that contributes to creating this flat and comic character. Furthermore, these unpleasant physical features can also contribute to the social status of this character. Beautiful women in *The Trilogy* do not serve in houses.

They either find good deals of marriage (Aisha, Kareema, Maryam), or become professional singers and practice sex labor (Zubayda, Zanuba), while unattractive, foolish, and corpulent women like Umm Hanafi become servants.

The narrative also addresses Umm Hanafi's job as she mostly appears in the oven room cooking or helping with the house chores. We learn that her primary duty in the household is "to fatten up the family, or more specifically the females" (*Palace Walk* 15). This indicates that she also provides emotional care beside the labor. She seems passionate about the girls' health and good appearance, making sure that they meet the standards of beauty which grant them a good value in the marriage market. Such a role develops as she becomes older and stays with the family longer. In the second volume of *The Trilogy*, *Palace of Desire*, she appears for only few times with Amina's grandchildren, watching and entertaining them. In the third volume, *Sugar Street* she takes the role of Amina's closest friend rather than her maid. We see her always by her mistress' side, sharing the happiness or the grief of losing the family members and trying to comfort Amina and Aisha for their losses.

Beyond the appearance and occupation of Umm Hanafi, the narrative does not offer much information about her own life and story apart from Amina and her family's circle. All that we learn about her background is that she is "in her forties [when the narrative begins] and had been a maid in the house when she was a girl. She had left the house to marry and had returned after her divorce" (*Palace Walk* 14). Later on, we also learn that her child Hanafi died during labor. Not much has been said about her past, her family; where does she come from? How did she end up working for Abd al-Jawad's family? And what lead to her divorce? The narrative repeatedly mentions in the last part of *The Trilogy* that Umm Hanafi has become one of the family members, and "a lifelong companion," who "had shared Amina's good and bad times and

had been absorbed into the family, so that she identified with all their joys and sorrows”  
(Mahfouz, *Sugar Street* 4).

Despite this position which she acquires throughout her lifetime, Umm Hanafi remains in the margin of the narrative and her story is not qualified to be told by the narrator. Moreover, there is no evidence of visible changes in Umm Hanafi’s position in the house. The narrative informs the reader at the beginning of the story that the physical space given to her at Amina’s house is the oven-room where she sleeps and works. As the narrative unfolds, there seems to be no signs of any change to Umm Hanafi’s room in conjunction with the claim that she has become a member of the family. The narrative, in fact, articulates at one point how Umm Hanafi is keen to show her loyalty and prove that she cares for this family just like a member of it: “She felt it is her duty as a longtime and devoted servant of the family not to keep quiet when calamity struck” (178). Such a statement reveals that her loyalty to the family can be questionable unlike the other members who do not feel the pressure to speak. This comment indicates that Umm Hanafi does not speak or act out of her self-terms and conditions. Rather, she remains the flat character of the loyal servant who follows her mistress, knows her place, and never exceeds her limits.

Bruce Robbins proposes that this tendency of writers to flatten and standardize servant characters in English literature indicates a suppressed feeling of unrest between the masters/mistresses and their employees who live at their homes and share their resources. The labor/occupation of these characters is the only justification for them to claim their share in that intimate familial circle. Their subjectivity as servants is the “passport,” as Robbins calls it, which secures the borders between classes in this domestic environment. He demonstrates, “Characters must be made standard, obligatory, exact; how else could employers feel safe from the strangers

they were taking into their homes? The character was [...] a “labor passport,” a means of policing the borders of respectable society by restricting the movements of class aliens” (Robbins 36). By creating servant characters such as Umm Hanafi, a loyal and obedient servant, who does not exceed the borders of her place or function, the narrator completes the circle of the ideal and stable middle-class family.

The relationship between Amina and Umm Hanafi, nevertheless, seems more complicated than a merely traditional mistress/servant relationship. Amina seems to treat Umm Hanafi with kindness. She defends her when Khadija accuses her of stealing food. Even if she believes she does, she angrily responds to Khadija by saying, “let her eat what she wants”, and “we have lots, and her belly has limits that cannot be exceeded” (*Palace Walk* 28). Umm Hanafi, on her side, seems to always provide Amina with aid not only in physical domestic tasks but also emotionally and in situations where Amina is supposed to function but is unable, or not allowed, due to her social condition and marital restrictions. While we assume that Umm Hanafi is financially dependent on Amina’s family, we realize as the story unfolds that Amina is physically and emotionally dependent on Umm Hanafi as well. Umm Hanafi replaces Amina in many situations to the point that she seems as if she is an extension of her, her appendage who does, thinks, and feels what she does. She walks Kamal to his school in times of unrest and danger, she visits clerks to opens the girls’ fortune and future, she visits the girls on behalf of Amina after they marry and move to their husbands’ houses, and she expresses joys and ululates in the family’s members weddings while Amina is restrained by her conservative husband from doing so. In one shocking scene, Umm Hanafi denies her own experience and feeling as she ululates in Yasin’s wedding, just after a short time from afre he sexually assaulted her. In *Sugar Street*, as Amina becomes older and tepid about her housewife duties, which used to be the

source of her value and sovereignty, she turns to Umm Hanafi to take over some of her duties. The narrative indicates, “Satisfied to supervise, she had turned over the oven-room and the pantry to Umm Hanafi and was remiss even in the supervision. Her confidence in their servant was boundless” (*Sugar Street* 4). “Boundless confidence” is how the narrative describes this relationship, but it seems like there are more complexities to the dynamic between the two women when examining it on the discursive level. At times they are very similar that they identify with each other. What facilitates this identification is that they both share several aspects of oppression: gender, ethnic roots (both are seemingly from rural origin), intelligence level (both are uneducated), and labor (both are responsible for the house chores). In fact, there is a subtle discourse in the narrative that associates the role of the wife to the role of the domestic servant. Amina’s character echoes Engels’ argument that the wife’s labor in the household, where she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn, means that the wife has become the “head servant”<sup>1</sup> (Engels). Amina’s relationship with Umm Hanafi implicates a sense of solidarity between the two women due to their vulnerable status in the household. However, when the narrative allows Umm Hanafi’s voice to be heard, a different chemistry between her and Amina can be observed as will be discussed next.

### 1.3 The Unheard Subaltern

There are rare situations in *The Trilogy* where domestic workers, such as Umm Hanafi and Nur, are given a more visible space and allowed to become the center of the plot. Yet their voices, I argue, remain habitually faint and unheard, which provides an exemplary case for the subaltern as described by Gayatri Spivak. The term subaltern, which has a military denotation – originally a junior officer in the British army – was first used for theory by Antonio Gramsci, referring to subordinated groups in terms of class, gender, language, cast, race, and culture. The

subaltern designates any group who is excluded from the circles of hegemonic structure of power, and who are out of the established institutions of societies, and are therefore denied the means and the agency to speak and represent their voice (Spencer 77). The term was further developed by Spivak who uses it to refer to “the lowest layers of a colonial or postcolonial society: the homeless, the day laborers, the unemployed” (“subaltern”). She argues that these groups are voiceless and invisible in both cultures. Spivak observes that the term has been broadly misused, as many oppressed groups, minorities, or individuals claim subalternity while they are part of the hegemonic discourse and can actually speak for themselves. Thus, Spivak emphasizes that “subaltern” is not a synonym of “oppressed” if the oppressed is still within the circle of hegemony. She clarifies, “*Subaltern* is not just a classy word for ‘oppressed, for [the] other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie [...] In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference” (De Kock 45). She also stresses the significance of the metaphoric meaning of the term, which implicates not only the incapability of speaking, but also involves the status of being unheard even if he/she speaks (De Kock 46).

In *The Trilogy*, there are some instances when Umm Hanafi and Nur exemplify this notion of the subaltern. I mentioned previously that Umm Hanafi never expresses any opinion or behavior revealing an independent will or self-consciousness. Instead, she is always an appendage and double to her mistress Amina. In few situations, however, the narrative allows Umm Hanafi a margin where she almost exposes a distinctive voice. Nevertheless, the narrative employs several techniques to keep this voice unheard, or more exact, heard only by the omniscient narrator, and through him by the reader, but not by the other characters within the narrative. For example, when Amina secretly visits the mosque of master al-Husayn after Sayyid

leaves for a work trip, and she falls and breaks her collarbone. Amina, her children, and Umm Hanafi have to think of ways to tell Sayyid without upsetting him. Umm Hanafi, as the narrator addressed, desperately wants to engage in the conversation. She states, “When my master learns what happened to you, he’ll have to overlook your mistake and praise god for your safe recovery” (*Palace Walk* 178). What is significant in this instance is the narrator’s perspective, wherein he reflects upon Umm Hanafi’s desire to be part of the conversation. The narrator speaks over her voice and claims that she “wanted to say something reassuring to lighten the atmosphere” (*Palace Walk* 178). When she speaks, the narrator proclaims that her words were met by the neglect they deserve, as if she has never spoken.

The second example is when the news arrived of Aisha being in labor. Both Amina and Umm Hanafi were in the oven-room, and Amina rushed to ask for permission from Sayyid to go to be with Aisha. Again, the narrator speaks for Umm Hanafi’s inner voice, which was discontented for the first time, as she felt that it was her obligation and right to also be there for Aisha’s delivery, just like Amina. The narrator proclaims that “Aisha had first opened her eyes in Umm Hanafi’s lap. Every child in the family had two mothers: Amina and Umm Hanafi. How could she be separated from her daughter at such a terrifying time?” (Mahfouz, *Palace Walk* 470). For the first and only time, Umm Hanafi’s attitude was not of loyalty and unconditional love. Rather, she is jealous and angry and we can grasp that micro struggle steaming out of her mind. These emotions, however, are expressed indirectly through the narrator’s voice and not by Umm Hanafi, which corresponds to Spivak’s notion of the incapability to speak and if spoken, to never be heard.

Mahfouz is known for his polyphonic style and for standing at equal stances with his characters and allowing them to speak and dialogue without intrusive intervention, as Siza Qasim



remarks in her structural study of Mahfouz' literature (197). However, in the last instance we see that the narrator approaches the character to such an extent that it is difficult to determine whether we hear the voice of the narrator or the voice of the character. The clue that the narrative gives to determine whether it is the narrator's voice or Umm Hanafi's is the inclusion of her name, which indicates that the narrator is speaking over her voice, resulting in depriving it from its distinctive tone. Despite Mahfouz's use of the polyphonic style in *The Trilogy*, it is still clear that Umm Hanafi is one of the few characters who is not given a space to speak within that dialogic environment.

The only time Umm Hanafi has a central role in the narrative is when Yasin tries to sexually assault her. She was sleeping in the open air to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the oven-room where she usually sleeps. Overtaken by sexual stimuli and lust, Yasin sprawls out on top of her body that was laying down the ground. Umm Hanafi, terrified by the surprise, screams loudly before she realizes who her attacker is and what he wants. Yasin tries to calm her down and convinces her to go with him to the oven-room. The narrative describes Umm Hanafi's reaction as a hesitant attitude" "In a troubled but decisive manner, she replied 'Certainly not, sir. Go to your room. Go. God's curse on Satan' . . ." (*Palace Walk* 276). Yasin decides to push things forward because, as the narrator indicates, he saw an encouraging sign as she lowers her voice, but before he could, his father Sayyid shows up trembling with rage (279). Once again, the narrator's voice takes the agency and blocks the space between Umm Hanafi and the reader. As an omniscient narrator, who is able to read her mind, he could deliver her thoughts. However, Umm Hanafi is still not allowed to express her own words. Her subjectivity is never centered by the narrative. The narrator alludes that Umm Hanafi could not speak up. His description implies that her words were against her desires, as if she wants to experience that sexual adventure with

the young man, but the only language she has in such a situation is religious lecturing in which she curses Satan. According to the narrator, “Umm Hanafi was not able to weigh her words carefully. They escaped from her in reaction to the situation. Perhaps they did not express her wishes so much as her surprise at a proposition that had not been preceded by any hint . . . She rejected the young man and schooled him without taking time to think whether she wanted to” (278). The treatment of this incident fits into the classic culture of male rape fantasy. That is, once you start raping, her you will eventually awaken her sexual desire and she will want it despite herself. This depiction of Umm Hanafi as a voiceless character that only speaks through the narrator furthers her oppression that also includes her class, age, body, and occupation. Altogether, this cluster of identities qualifies Umm Hanafi to be a subaltern, according to Spivak’s theorization.

Umm Hanafi was not the only subaltern victim of Yasin's sexual violence. A similar scenario recurs with Nur, the maid of Yasin’s first wife Zaynab, who briefly appears in the novel when Yasin instigates another horrific sexual assault upon her. While he forcefully approaches her, she seems helpless and all what she can do is trying to stop him in a passive manner until Yasin’s wife interrupts and witnesses them together. While Zaynab’s anger erupts and she starts wailing to call attention to the scandal and let everyone in the household be informed, Yasin freezes in his spot. The narrative briefly turns to Nur and informs us that she quietly and silently left the scene. No further explanation is given about her destiny: “He turned and saw the figure of the maid leaving [the room] with a large bundle in her hand. She hastened to the door of the stairway and departed. He shrugged his shoulders disdainfully” (*Place Walk* 384). The aftermath of this incident is that Yasin is forced to divorce his wife under the insistence of her father. Yasin’s assaults are not necessarily reprehensible because of the assault itself. Rather, he is

scolded and forced to divorce his wife because he attempted to have a sexual contact with a *Black* maid. In the case of Umm Hanafi, he is punished by being forced to marry – which would supposedly prevent him from assaulting other women – because he assaulted an unattractive old servant. But what makes the situation with Nur even more unbearable is that she is a Black maid, violating the class and race conventions. This is shown most evidently in the conversation that ensues between Sayyid and Zaynab's father, Muhammad Iffat. While Sayyid attempts to diffuse Muhammad's rage, Muhammad was showing his disgust and spitting on the ground and repeating, "A black maid! [...] I get drunk, become rowdy, and take lovers, but I refrain from wallowing in the mud. We all do. A black maid... Is my daughter destined to share a husband with her in a polygamous marriage?" (*Palace Walk* 405-406). Muhammad is referring to the class and race violations and insists that there is a difference between having affairs with Black maids versus professional entertainers, reminding Sayyid that, "a servant is a servant and a lady is a lady" (*Palace Walk* 406). While divorce is still frowned upon within the middle-class, it is still preferable to having an affair with a person from a lower socio-economic background.

In these two instances, both Umm Hanafi and Nur are major actants in the span of events. However, their existence and voice in the text remains unheard and invisible. The event is about them, the assault has happened to them, and everyone has a say about the situation, except for them. Umm Hanafi and Nur are stripped of their voice and agency, and thus, become subaltern. While the degree of visibility of domestic workers between these three models differs from being completely omitted from the scene while showing traces of their existence; to partially participating as loyal servants; to finally, being the center of the plot, they remain on the margins and treated as complimentary units.

## 2. Sha'rawi: The Lady who was Born in a Golden Cradle but Rejected Amusement<sup>2</sup>

Huda Sha'rawi's memoirs *Muthakkirat Huda Sha'rawi* – first published in Arabic (1981) – is a unique piece of literature regarding the representation of sexes, class dynamics, and the treatment of domestic workers. The text, which consist of memoirs of Sha'rawi's personal life and activism, has been celebrated as one of the first feminist publications in Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world. Due to the tremendous amount of information and details about Sha'rawi's unique experience as one of the first women in modern Arabic-speaking world to become a public figure, this text has been deemed as a historical document on the social and political life in Egypt around the nineteenth and the twentieth century<sup>3</sup> (Ashour, et.al 151). Sha'rawi (1879-1947) herself is a leading figure of Egyptian nationalism and women's rights activism. She was among the first group of Egyptian *ladies* who formed the women branch of *al-wafd* political party, for which she was elected as a president. An advocate for women's rights, she fought for social, cultural, and political reforms (Ahmed 174). She belongs to the generation and movement that led to the Egyptian nationalist revolution of 1919 against the British occupation. Notwithstanding the foregoing, Sha'rawi's power and success came from her upper-class status as a member of an aristocratic and a politically engaged family, which gave her access to influential circles in politics. In her study of Sha'rawi's memoirs, Mohja Kahf points out that much of Sha'rawi's power hails from her "alliance with men who shared a particular intersection of class, ideology, and political interests [...] the gentlemen of the *nahda*" (Kahf, "*Huda Sha'rawi*" 55). Further, Sha'rawi built strong connections with other upper-class women who were active and capable of taking a role in the political affair. In cooperation with these friends, she established the first Egyptian Feminist Union and represented it at the ninth international Women Suffrage Alliance Conference in Rome in 1923. Sha'rawi dedicated her

entire life to fighting for women's education and equality and has been celebrated by many scholars as one of the first, and uncontested voices of feminism in Egypt during this early phase (Rula 219).

Nevertheless, just like many other individuals of the national movement and the intellectuals of *nahda*, Sha'rawi was fascinated by Western civilization and culture. The feminist discourse she led, which was also the dominant feminist discourse in Egypt and the Arabic context, was a Western-oriented one. Upper and middle-class feminists at the time promoted a model of feminism that assumed the only way to lift the Egyptian and Arab societies from their backwardness is to follow the Western and secular model (Ahmed 175). This model of the liberated, autonomous, national, modern women that Sha'rawi and her women colleague pursued fitted, as well, with the class and national interests of the *nahda*'s men who conceived themselves as the modern civilized nation. Most of these affluent, aristocratic, *nahda* heroes, including Sha'rawi (and her father Sultan Pasha) were accused of cooperating with the British colonizer or, to say the least, supporting its agenda since it served their interests as privilege (Kahf, "Huda Sha'rawi" 55-56).

It is significant to understand this social and intellectual background of Sha'rawi in order to have a comprehensive understanding of her views on social justice and the way she took in the matter of class dynamics and represented domestic workers in her text. As a lady (*sayeda*) of the upper-class, it is unlikely that she would abandon her privilege and call for equality for women from all classes, let alone attempt to break with a system that conserves the power and superiority she enjoys by belonging to the privileged class. However, her aim, as Kahf highlights, was to affirm her personality as a modern feminist and rights activist – a model that requires a certain degree of rupture with the old-fashioned lifestyle, traditions, and privilege.

Thus, her text seems to be wavering between the appealing secular values of equality and call for justice, and between the status quo that secure her class privilege (Kahf, “Huda Sha’rawi” 55).

After all, women’s equality to men which Sha’rawi demands and dedicates her life to, seems to be an exclusive equality within the same class. Instead of advocating social justice and targeting grievances of mass Egyptian women, Sha’rawi’s version of feminism reveals more class barriers and biases<sup>4</sup> as suggested by Kahf (“Packaging” 162-163).

Sha’rawi is criticized by many Marxist and postcolonial Arab feminists such as Leila Ahmed and Nawal El Saadawi for neglecting aggravations of working-class women. Although these scholars admit the achievements of the first front of upper-class feminists, they criticize them for denying the role of working-class women in the social and political movement, being isolated from them, and focusing on causes that never concerned these poor groups of the community. In her book, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi indicates,

However in view of their wealth, and the fact that they were isolated from the poorer classes, they knew nothing about the conditions of working women, and the inhuman exploitation which was their lot. One of the demonstrations organized by working women ended in a gathering at the premises of the new Women’s Federation, but the aristocratic leaders who were responsible for its activities paid no attention to the grievances of these poor women, and concentrated on the issue of abolishing the veil, which was unlikely to evoke much enthusiasm amongst them since in any case the working women in factories and fields had never known what it was to wear a veil. (348)

Sha’rawi seems to be aware of this paradoxical discourse and seeks in her memoirs to absolve herself of these accusations, but she may have failed that one task. Despite the loud humanist rhetoric diffused throughout the text, and the rallying for equal rights and political activism, the class bias and the lack of sympathy with lower-class women in her text is conspicuous. The text, as Kahf puts it, can be read against the will of its author's control.

## 2.1 The Lady versus the Peddler

The first few chapters of *Muthakkirat Hoda Sha'rawi* (roughly thirteen chapters out of forty four), focusing on Sha'rawi's coming-of-age and personal life, are packed with stories involving various groups of working-class people such as servants, domestic enslaved men and women, wetnurses, door-to-door peddlers, storytellers, and beggars. These extensive appearances and stories are expected since Sha'rawi grew up an aristocratic family surrounded by domestic workers and other lower-class people providing different services (Kahf, "Packaging" 160). Kahd explains that most of these stories are narrated in a manner that highlights the vices and flaws of these women and displays their slander and malice. The discursive pattern of these stories reveals a subtle class tension (Kahf, "Huda Sha'rawi" 59-61). Sha'rawi's feminist ideology and her rallying for women's civil and political rights do not seem to apply to such lower-class women. Even though she attempts to smooth this class prejudice and cover it under a silver lining of stories of her family's kind treatment of servants and the noble history and contribution of this family in abolishing the forced labor system in Egypt, classist comments keep slipping in occasionally indicating the class conflict that Sha'rawi deals with<sup>5</sup> (Kahf, "Huda Sha'rawi" 55-56).

While recalling the traumatic event of her father's death and the way she learnt (or did not learn) about it in the first page of her memoirs, Sha'rawi brings to the scene the class tension through some comments that are meant to favor the modern values and lifestyle over the traditional ones. She opens the scene with a comparison between the modern and traditional ways of raising a child, implying that the modern way provided children with a better physical and psychological care. As a matter of fact, she states that she was raised by servants and wetnurses according to the conventions among upper-class communities. This piece of

information, however, does not stop at this informative purpose. In order to support her point, Sha'rawi inserts a comment that degrades these servants and accuses them of disabling children's healthy growth. She describes them as ignorant, superstitious, and lacking of any principles of education. Moreover, although she admits in the same page that families, in general, tend to hide significant news or information from their children such as the death of family members, she still blames the servants and their lack of morals for not being informed about her father's death; "And I was one of those children, and we were taken care of by ignorant servants who hid from us facts that we should know and surrounded us with fences of superstitions that affected our little naive brains" (Sha'rawi, *Harem Years* 8).

From this early stage of the writing, the intense class dynamic is released. Sha'rawi moves in this passage from recalling an event of shock and grief to building a judgment by focusing on the vices of these servants. This judgment appears to constitute a coherent structure and discourse in the narrative regarding domestic workers. Sha'rawi establishes a dividing line between *us*- members of the upper-class, and *them*- lower class people; "*they*" are everything that doesn't belong to *us*. "We" represent ethics, virtues, commitment, honesty, courtesy, and high culture; they represent lies, ignorance, opportunism, dishonesty, and sleaziness. This rhetoric of class bias can be traced in most all of the events and situations in which servants, enslaved and members of lower-class are presented in the memoirs. The narrator does not spare any opportunity to emphasize these images. It is the grand narrative and identity that Sha'rawi desires to be associated with or distinguished from. The images and representations of the working-class community moves in a parallel structure with the narrative of the upper-class; this technique reveals the subtle class tension that is widely spread throughout this text. The discursive pattern of representing lower-class people in Sha'rawi's text brings to mind the very



concept of representation discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*; in order for the West to prove its superiority, it has to create its other. Said explains how the Orientalist discourse attempts to divide the world into two distinguished camps: the Occident that upholds the attributes of order, sanity, power, rationality, masculinity; and the Orient representing the opposite other with its disorder, insanity, weakness, barbarism, tyranny, and femininity. He illustrates how through time these images become essentialized, coherent and extended. He emphasizes that the Orient, as much as the Occident, “is not an inert fact of nature” (Said 12), rather, they are both man-made and fabricated. A similar analogy can be seen in Sha’rawi’s discourse as she attempts to represent women of higher-class as ladies (sayyidat) who uphold high manners, honesty, responsibility, rationality, sympathy, and physical beauty versus public women, who are liars, imposters, loud, and even unattractive. One example of this dualism is her friend Adila Hanim Nabrawi, the graceful, beautiful woman and the Opera music fan who grows up in France and is influenced by its culture versus the former enslaved and divorcee woman Fatanaat who is loud, snippy, ugly, and who hates the young Huda for no reason.

Servants and other working-class groups, thus, seem to have a specific function in Sha’rawi’s memoirs. They are employed as a tool to highlight the distinctive and supposedly high qualities and superiority of the upper-class community. Opposite attributes and class inequality in the memoirs are sharp, clear, and profoundly pre-given. In one story, she as a child is fooled by the “mischievous Abyssinian slave.” Anbar, who plays various tricks on her to steal her money. In another story a peddler tries to draw her in a fraudulent bargain for a piece of land her mom gifted her (Sha’rawi, *Muthakkirat* 42-43). Third incident occurs when a male thief masquerading as a beggar woman who claims to be from a respectable, wealthy family but is financially struggling asks for help. Little innocent Huda feels ashamed to turn the poor woman

down so she gives her all her savings only to realize later that it is a con man (Sha'rawi, *Muthakkirat* 35). The common pattern in all these stories is that the young lady tends – for her virtuousness and the purity of her heart – to believe and trust people, while the peddlers, beggars, and working people are evil and deceitful by their very nature. Most of the comments on lower-class communities in the narrative disclose a lack of familiarity and personal knowledge about them, as well as a desire to confirm the distinctive identity of the upper-class and keep barriers between the two worlds: the poor and the privileged. Bruce Robbins draws similar conclusions in his discussion about servants' representation within English literary texts. He argues that the presence of maids and lower-class groups in the English fictions functions as the “foil that brings out the ‘elegance’ of the jewel, as the indistinct ‘background’ that sets the upper-class foreground in sharper relief” (3).

In her article “Huda Sha'rawi's *Muthakkirati*, *The Memoirs of the First Lady of Arab Modernity*,” Mohja Kahf further investigates Sha'rawi's ambivalence towards class struggles. She demonstrates how Sha'rawi seems triggered to claim legitimacy for the new female individual model she proposes while reserving her privilege as a lady (*Sayeda*) of an authentic root/ *usul*. Navigating her way through these seemingly contradicting identities is an uneasy task. Sha'rawi, according to Kahf, proclaims her nationalist roots by recounting her father's family's history and virtues in a similar manner to the Arab genealogical pride in their poetry (“Huda Sha'rawi” 55). She takes on the task to defend her father and clear his reputation from the accusation of supporting British colonization. This beginning “injects the text with the anxiety of her class about the double-edgedness of its role as cautious collaborators with the British on one hand and ardent Egyptian nationalists on the other, an uneasy duality not directly acknowledged” (Kahf “Huda Sha'rawi” 55). The critical situation of Sha'rawi's class status and her attempts to

find her way between the modern secular values she adopts versus the traditions, fundamental, and privileged social status she grew up with makes her contribution to modern Arabic literature “both limited and enriched” in Kahf’s words (“Huda Sha’rawi” 54). This dual limitation and enrichment can be examined through some examples within the narrative in which Sha’rawi brings an amplitude of voices – the female lower-class peddlers and the servants and wetnurses. She recalls how her childhood evenings were spent with these wetnurses and servants listening to their fascinating stories about “their captivation and their lands and traditions” (Sha’rawi, *Muthakkirat* 41), while at the same time limiting their discursive voices by not actually telling these thrilling stories. Kahf concludes, “She subordinates that potential discursive plurality to her unified voice by evading their direct discourse and keeping their characters half-acknowledged on the margins of the story [. . .] she repeats only fragments of the servants’ speech so that its charm cannot attract the reader; enough that the wetnurses’s sentence is still ringing in her ear” (Kahf, *Huda Sha’rawi* 61). There is still a tendency to maintain class barriers despite the overt advocacy for humanism / *ensaniya* and gender equality. Such noble values did not enable Sha’rawi to denounce the vast class differences that existed within the compounds of a single home. Instead, it was normalized and even celebrated at times when Sha’rawi glorifies her childhood’s memories, remembering her family’s house filled with an army of servants who knew their responsibilities and do whatever in their capacity to please their masters (Sha’rawi, *Muthakkirat* 40).

Not only were the conditions of lower-class people normalized, their economy was also affected by the aristocratic financial transition towards a modern and westernized lifestyle. Sha’rawi advocates for a shift from the traditional shopping from lower-class peddlers to modern big shopping malls that follow typical capitalist and consumerist ideals. She justifies this shift by

recalling several incidents indicating the wickedness of untrusted peddlers who specialized in gossiping, causing damages to prominent families, and cheating wealthy people with unrealistic prices. She notes, “I didn’t like<sup>6</sup> most of these peddlers- although some were quite witty- because they often damaged prominent families through their indiscretions and lies,” and “they also charged exorbitant prices” (Sha’rawi, *Harem Years* 48). She eventually convinces her mother to stop shopping from these local peddlers and go to bigger markets where they can find more options, save money, and avoid the wickedness of these peddlers. Kahf also notes that “*Mudhakkirati* allows us to see, perhaps in spite of Sha’rawi, that feminism consciousness conceived in privileged terms of personal autonomy was played out against a colonial economy in which modernization profited Western business and certain affluent sectors of Egyptian society at the expense of vast numbers of local distributors and small producers” (Kahf, *Packaging Huda* 162). Class, in Sha’rawi’s memoirs, installs a barrier against women’s solidarity. It prevents the ladies from gaining some form of empathy with their struggling sisters and feeds their own privilege.

### 3. *The Open Door* and Class Body Politics

Latifa Al-Zayyat (1923-1996) is an Egyptian writer and political and social activist. She is an exemplary Arab nationalist intellectual who engaged in the struggle and movements of liberation against colonialism besides fighting for women’s rights. She was imprisoned twice for her anti-regime activism (Elsadda 97). Her first novel, *The Open Door*, remains one of the most significant modern Arab women’s texts, not only because it depicts women’s insurgency against their traditional roles and their resistance to the occupation, but also because it was one of the rare novels that connects this rebellion to the nationalist discourse and tackles gender politics and women’s involvement in the struggle of independence (Elsadda 99-100).

Narrated from the third-person point of view, *The Open Door* centers on the coming of age of the heroine Layla, a middle-class intelligent young girl whose life was shaped by the anticolonial struggle in Egypt. The novel begins in 1946, with wide demonstrations and strikes against the British occupation of Egypt, and ends with the battle of Port Said in 1956. Between these two events, there are several crucial political events that were synchronizing with Layla's life and determining its ups and downs. The public and private intersect strongly in the novel as Layla's journey toward her freedom corresponds with the nation's journey to decolonization. Layla is placed at the center of critical events where she is the main player in three intertwining and parallel battles: the feminist battle against the patriarchal society; the Marxist battle against middle-class principles and fundamentals and against the hierarchy of power in the family; and the national battle against colonization, which functions as the main force that enables individuals to attain their freedom and assist them to defeat gender class obstacles (Elsadda 102).

Domestic workers appear in the novel as a prominent part of the social structure of middle-class families. Al-Zayyat introduces at least one domestic worker in every household in the narrative. They mostly function as a sign of class in a pattern similar to *The Trilogy*: receiving guests or passing messages between characters while remaining in the margins of the plot. *The Open Door*, however, tackles more issues regarding body politics between middle and lower-class women in order to expose the contradictory ethics and the multifaceted oppression of women in such communities. The narrative compares between the ideal image of a "respectful" middle-class woman who is framed as the embodiment of chastity, modesty, and courtesy versus the stereotypical image of lower-class woman who embodies seduction, immorality, and impudence. This dichotomy is illustrated through the characters of Layla and Sayyida, who is Layla's aunt's maid, and her cousin Isam's secret sexual partner.

The middle-class body politics first manifests with Layla in her battle with her family, the locus where individuals start to learn and embrace their imaginative and expected gender roles. This battle begins early when she is a little girl entering the world of puberty. She used to wake up early and secretly read the newspaper so that no one in the house recognizes that she is interfering in men's business, as reading newspapers is not a familiar act for traditional females in Egypt at the time (Al-Zayyat ch.1). With her first menstruation, her father dictates lists of restrictions and prohibitions on her: "Layla, you must realize that you have grown up. From now on you are absolutely not to go out by yourself. No visits. Straight home from school" (Al-Zayyat ch.1). It is the process of becoming a woman, and a young girl, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, "cannot become a 'grown-up' without accepting her femininity" (390). Not only Layla, but every member of the family should be alert about these new decrees that regulate gender roles in the family. So, after preaching to Layla, the father turns his eyes to her brother Mahmud and adds, "I don't want to see any novels or girlie magazines around here [...] If there is something you want to read, you can read it outside the house [...] I don't want anything poisoning the girl's mind" (Al-Zayyat ch.1). This transformation of Layla's body into a feminine one, thus, determines her position in the family; from now on, she should be aware of the lack of authority she has over her own body.

Then comes the mother's turn to tame Layla and educate her about womanhood with endless social '*usul* (fundamentals) – the proper protocols and ethics on how to be an ideal middle-class woman – that seem to Layla full of contradictions and hypocrisy. The mother always exhorted her to be obedient, to learn how to be courteous, to sit properly, to keep her voice low and soft, and to uphold the traditional roles of femininity. This process of the feminization of Layla can be seen as part of what Judith Butler calls the performativity of gender

roles, that occurs through “repetition[s] and [...] ritual[s], which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xv). There is a sense of tacit consensus in the novel about the concept of femininity and how it should be performed through what was expected of Layla as a female. Layla’s mother and other older women in her community took on the role of the bearers of these rituals and traditions. Layla keeps rebelling against these ‘performative’ roles and ‘fundamentals’ despite the fact that she seems to partially accept the constructed and contradicted feminine identity. She is expected to be modest and ashamed of her femininity and body desires, and at the same time, she has to expose this femininity and look attractive so she could attain a better bargain for marriage. This way of upbringing confuses her even in small details such as her physical body and its positioning, “For she walked as if bound in heavy chains, dragging her body behind her, shoulders hunched and head pitched forward as if determined to get where she was going with utmost haste [...] She never knew where to put her hands; they seemed bodies apart, foreign to her. Her movements spoke of heaviness and fear” (Al-Zayyat ch.2). These comments demonstrate how women in this middle-class society are denied their rights of space and taught how to use their body’s capacity and physically engage with things in a particular modality through “a set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman” (Young 140). These body politics, however, are not immutable. They can be adjustable and replaceable according to women’s class and status as we see in the situation of Sayyida who stands on the contrary to Layla’s sense of body alienation, lack of confidence, and asexual image.

Sayyida seems always physically comfortable, sturdy, and bold to the point of provocation. She is hyper-sexualized, to the extent that all what we know about her appearance is

her hips and lips. She raises her eyes brazenly as she talks and drags her full body flagrantly as she moves (Al-Zayyat ch.9). In one of the witty gestures of the novel, Al-Zayyat further complicates class body politics when she presents a scene in which Layla enters Isam's – her cousin and first love interest – room wanting to talk to him in private, and finds Sayyida – now Isam's secret sexual partner – cleaning the carpet. As Layla asks her politely to leave the room, Sayyida slowly moves "letting her full hips sway slowly, heavily, a half-smile on her lips that was not directed to anyone, as if she were smiling at something that had just come into her mind – a secret, something every private and significant, something that gave her a sense of importance" (Al-Zayyat ch.4). An analogy between the way Layla and Sayyida move reveals, on the one hand, that there are different body-positioning rules for women of different classes. On the other hand, this analogy reinforces Butler's notion of gender as imaginative and performative. That is, lower-class women are perceived to be physically strong and independent, they have to work, protect themselves, and financially support their families, thus, their manner of moving and body demeanor seems comfortable and even aggressive comparing to the delicate and restricted physical movement of middle-class women who are perceived to be weak, obedient, soft, and dependent.

Furthermore, neither Isam's mother nor his sister find any problem when they discover Isam's sexual relationship with Sayyida. Isam initiates this relationship to get rid of his sexual desire of Layla's body. Layla, according to him is a chaste and respectable girl who cannot be thought of in a lustful way. She belongs to a respectful family who puts their trust in him so he feels ashamed to betray them if he initiates a sexual relationship with her (Al-Zayyat ch.7). The maid, on the other side, is a poor girl from a lower-class family and so her sexuality is perceived to be more available, and she is seen as more of a collective property than an individual agent.



Al-Zayyat tackles one of the social taboos through this triangle: Layla/ Sayyida/ Isam. Not only that, she highlights the phenomenon of domestic workers' sexual abuse, but she also addresses the social acceptance and complicity to this affair as opposed to the total rejection of any sexual activity for middle-class girls out of wedlock. However, what is actually striking about the narrative treatment of this incident is that we barely feel any sense of empathy with Sayyida. Despite Al-Zayyat's melodramatic style, her overt personal voice in the narrative, and her usual denouncement of any form of oppression, she does not openly condemn the multiplied oppression of Sayyida, nor does she bother to reflect on the social and economic situation of this character. There is, of course, the subtle counter-hegemonic discourse that is implicated in the fact that the narrative does actually highlight the issue. However, there is no explanation of why Sayyida is most likely to be subjugated to this abuse more than any other character in the narrative. The sexual relationship between Isam and Sayyida is depicted as a consensual one although there is an obvious imbalance of power between the master and the mistress. The narrative, indeed, portrays Sayyida as a mischievous woman with a playful and seductive manner who needs no sympathy. She is hyper-sexualized to the point that she is connected to the animalistic image: "She raised her eyes, large and round like those of a cow" (Ch.9). And while it takes a whole novel to understand Layla's intelligence, sensitive personality, high inspirations and noble goals such as participating in the national struggle, it only takes this one incident to represent this flat persona of Sayyida, which exemplifies a neglect towards the various identities of lower-class women. The only comment that shows some sympathy with Sayyida is a piece of monologue of Layla, "and anyway, what about that other woman? Had it never occurred to him that she was a human being, too? That he had harmed her bodily and emotionally, that he had threatened her humanity?" (ch.9).

Domestic workers' sexual exploitation by their upper/ middle-class masters is elaborately discussed by feminists such as El Saadawi as she covers issues of women's class, health, and access to material bases in Egypt and other Arab states. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, for instance, she addresses that one of the biggest problems faced by poor girls of rural origins – who mostly work as domestic servants – is illegal (extra-marital) pregnancy and the lack of access to abortion. She explains the intersectional modes of oppression that these girls endure and the circumstances that lead to this trouble, pointing out to gender, class, and regional aspects,

They leave their native villages for the towns and cities in search of a job, usually as servants in the houses of middle and upper class families. These girls become the only sexual object available to the young males, and sometimes even the elder males, in the family. The adolescent boys find them much more suitable to their needs than a sister, cousin or female student at school or in college. The boys are less liable to feel guilty if sex is practiced with a servant girl, and in addition they are not doing wrong to somebody of their own class, but to a creature who is socially very much their inferior. In addition, she is preferable to a prostitute since sex with her is free of charge and does not threaten them with the chances of venereal disease. (83-84)

There is no effort in *The Open Door* to bring such details about domestic workers. The whole story of Isam/Sayyida's affair is narrated through Layla's perspective – which was only limited to her hurt feelings because of the cheating, and thus, overlooking the violation of Sayyida's body. Sayyida remains in the shadow. She has no say about an event that she is part of. Even though she is represented as a bold and sassy woman, she is still a subaltern in the narrative.

Female domestic workers in these three texts: *Muthakkirat Huda Sha'rawi*, *The Trilogy*, and *The Open Door* have a lot of similarities. They all function as a sign of status, and they are either loyal and victimized (such as Umm Hanafi) or seductive and demonized (such as Sayyida). But in all the cases, they are subaltern. They never speak to themselves nor have any access to hegemonic circles. Plus, they are always represented in relation to their work or

occupation, they “were made rather than born” – echoing Simone de Beauvoir’s theorization of socially-constructed femininity (Straub 4). Their identities as servants are specific to their situation which never changes within the narrative (Straub 4).

## Chapter II

### Domestic servitude in Contemporary Arabic Fiction.

#### 1. Contemporary Arabic narrative: From the National to the Marginal

The iconic Arabic fiction of the mid-century provided a rich narrative on the national and political struggle while also aiming to depict the impact of the political complications on the social development and the process of lifestyle changing. The era was marked by its postcolonial experience and the forming of new identities of the post-independent Arabic-speaking states and nations. Intellectuals of this era and the following few decades witnessed the aftermaths of the WW1 and lived through the consequences of WW2 and other domestic political conflicts. The Arab and Islamic world around that period was under the effects of the fall of the Ottoman Empire (1908-1922) and the seizing of its remaining legacy by the European colonial powers. Arab people fought a long struggle to expel the colonizers and gain independence. National forces were eventually able to establish native governments and rearrange the political scene<sup>7</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the literary production of this era of struggle for liberation and identity formation is predominantly occupied with narrating the history of the nation, focusing on characters of elites and nationalist groups, and tackling topics related to nationalism and anticolonial experience (Elsadda XXIII). Although this postcolonial conscious advocated for values of freedom and equality, it is deemed by many scholars as a reductionist and limiting discourse since it only focuses on issues of nationhood and the struggle of independence at the expense of other issues regarding minorities, marginalized groups, and other intimate aspects.

Perhaps one of the most controversial perspectives on postcolonial literature in general is the argument of national allegory by acclaimed literary critic Fredric Jameson. In his well-known essay “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Jameson argues that “All

third-world texts are necessarily... allegorical... they are to be read as... *national allegories*” (69). Jameson states in this sweeping essay that there is an obsessive return to nationalism in the third-world literature, and that this literature’s texts center around collectivity and political dimensions even if they seem private and intimate on the surface (69). The individual subject in a story or literary works, he suggests, can be read as a symbolic representation that reflects some aspect of their nationhood and larger societal or political matters. Jameson’s hypothesis, although it totalizes and generalizes about Third World cultural production, can provide a useful lens to analyze several postcolonial iconic Arabic texts and understand their tendency to focus on communal matters and elite characters. The character of Kamal in Mahfouz’s *Trilogy* and the protagonist Layla in al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door*, for example, can definitely be read as national allegories as they represent elite characters whose fate matches that of the nation.

Several Arab critics, in fact, seem to have similar views to Jameson on Arabic postcolonial novels. Faisal Darraj, for example, proposes in his book *The National Memory in Arabic Novel* that the Arabic novel throughout the twentieth century can be read as a national novel that diligently records what Arab individuals aspired to and never gained (*The National* 17). However, Arab scholars further criticize the national rhetoric loaded in this literature not only for overlooking issues of minorities and oppressed groups, but also because the majority of this literature, whether consciously or not, backed authoritarian regimes, advertised their propagandas, and justified oppression and exploitation of oppositions and underprivileged groups. In his book *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel*, for instance, Muhsin Musawi suggests that because of its total commitment to issues of nationhood or statehood against mandate and colonizing powers, Arabic postcolonial literature was “trapped... in a master narrative mechanism, which is, at times, reductionist to the core. It overlooks specific problems and

bypasses the marginalization of women, peasants, laborers, and ethnic groups” (49). The colonizer, to use Musawi’s words, also contribute to the process of oppression and exploitation through supporting oligarchy and establishing additional strata of landowners and political leaders of native elites who claimed moral authority to rule and oppress any opposition or potential competitors. Musawi demonstrates, “As anti-colonial struggle produced a rich register to cope with national and political issues and needs, its post-independence rhetoric suffers fossilization. While relying on a past struggle, its emerging state or leadership uses this past to justify totalitarian practices” (49). Totalitarian regimes have justified repressive laws and oppressing their oppositions under slogans of uniting the nation, national security, liberating Palestine or defeating Israel. This conversion of many post-independence Arab states into police states that suppress their own citizens while allying with the colonizers to provide protections to the elites has resulted in a drastic shift in the literary discourse (Darraj 19). Several intellectuals and writers started to question the validity of these regimes and attempted to offer oppositional readings against the romanticized national narrative. Arab critics such as Darraj consider Mahfouz’s أولاد حارتنا (*Children of Gebelawi*- 1959) as the first fictional text that launched this shift from advocating national narrative to narrative emphasizing the repressive nature of the totalitarian national regimes (*The National* 19). Other critics use the concept of post-Mahfouzian novel to distinguish between these two different consciousnesses – not only two periods – of modern Arabic fiction (Musawi 22).

The new generation of Arab writers woke up on a new realization and different concerns due to the socio-economic and political changes within their milieu. Besides the colonial legacy, other factors led to this prominent shift in the cultural and literary mode. The Arab world underwent major events including the Palestinian *Nakba* of 1948 (the Palestinian exodus), the

1976 Arab-Israeli war (known as *Nakseh* or The Setback), The Iran-Iraq war of 1980, the Gulf war of 1991, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. These factors, combined with severe financial and administrative corruption and poor living conditions of the majority of Arab citizens, led to the massive social movements in 2011. The so-called Arab spring movements that have, and still are sweeping many Arab countries, demand radical economic reforms and revolutionary political changes. Another global factor that has influenced Arab societies is the introduction of the internet and the information revolution that has started in the Arabic region mainly in the late 1990s. The interactive and democratic nature of the internet and social media began to influence new generations of Arab writers and intellectuals who started to pay more attention to current issues that affect their societies such as multinational capitalism, neoliberalism, and neo-patriarchies.

Arabic literature, as a matter of fact, responds to these conditions both on the level of themes and on the level of writing techniques. Uncertainty and skepticism regarding the master narrative and grand values led to shifting from, and sometimes cutting off with, traditional writing style and discourse that is characterized by its certainty and 'homophony,' or in Bakhtin's terms 'monologism' (single-thought discourse) to more diverse, dialogic, or polyphonic discourses (Thamir 31). The disintegration of the one absolute and transcendental perspective or consciousness required different writing techniques in order to express the new consciousness and conditions of the new reality. Cinematic effect, intertextuality, metafiction, fragmentation, and irony are among the structural and stylistic patterns that have begun to emerge as formal bearers of the new consciousness in Arabic fiction (Darraj, *The Novel's Theory* 82-90, and Yaktine 130-176). The newer generation of Arab writers began to break away from the mainstream system, culture, and discourse. These writers felt the urgent need for self-

criticism and revision of the history, identity, culture, and social structure. They started questioning and shaking the very conventions and beliefs of the former generations of intellectuals, providing a discourse that is subversive to the notion of nationalism and its connotations of homogeneity. Many of them diversified their attention beyond the ‘grand national’ narrative to more narratives of private lives, intimacy, and socio-economic tensions within societies. Much space, consequently, is given to common people, muted groups, and powerless characters (Yaqine 163, and Musawi 8-9).

The increasing narrative on modern servitude and domestic labor in contemporary Arabic fiction falls under this tendency of stripping Arabic culture and history from alleged idealization, engaging with current issues, representing more marginal groups, and advocating global concepts of human rights. While the iconic Arabic novel marginalized and neglected working-class characters – as discussed in the previous chapter – more recent novels have sought to focus on the suffering of this group and to condemn the hierarchy of socio-economic structure that has caused injustice and inequality. This is not to suggest that all contemporary Arabic novels have cut off with the traditional treatment and neglect of domestic workers. Rather, it is an attempt to address the modifications and updates within the Arabic fictional discourse.

Regarding women and gender representation specifically, a simple comparison between Arabic literature of the *nahda* and contemporary Arabic novels reveals a growing consciousness of the multi-dimensional oppression of these subjects. Contemporary Arabic literature attempts to make sense of the social tension that accompanied the developments and the process of modernizing Arab societies. Oppression in this literature is no longer depicted as one-dimensional or only one factored be it colonization, patriarchy, or capitalism. The treatment of women of working-class characters depicted in texts of this chapter shows more awareness of



issues of class and race, as well as indicating that women in Arab societies do not necessarily share the same experiences and the same types of oppression. Unlike the tendency of homogenizing women's experiences in iconic Arabic fiction following the old fashioned European-centered feminist ideal that assumes patriarchy, symbolized by male characters, is the main adversary of women, contemporary Arabic literature begins to overcome this monolithic view to more heterogeneity and diversity in women's representation. Further, because domestic work is still predominantly a feminine affair that is directed and performed by women, it is more likely to be the domain that exposes more racism, classism, and oppression within women's circles. The majority of these texts that depict female domestic workers either as main or secondary characters begin to demonstrate how this underprivileged group of women are often oppressed by other women of higher and privileged classes. In addition, we can see at this stage that the prototypes of these domestic workers as either innocent victims – like Nur in Mahfouz' *Trilogy* – or seductive demons – like Sayyida in *The Open Door* – begin to fade, yet not disappear completely, in favor of more vibrant mature characters with distinctive voices and stories.

One reason to this change in the discourse of Arabic literature is the increase in numbers of Arab women writers from different countries and socio-economic backgrounds. The literary production of these writers enriches Arabic culture with distinctive voices and helped to paint the literary scene with heterogeneity and nonconformity. Some Arab women writers and critics such as Nawal El Saadawi and Leila Ahmed contribute, as well, to the anti-Western feminist movements and called for more efforts to examine conditions of women within the political, socio-economic, and cultural contexts. These demands were part of global movements of postcolonial, poststructural, and Marxist feminism that challenges the Euro-centered white

feminism and calls for more precision in representing different groups of women. In her well-known essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” the postcolonial feminist Chandra Mohanty argues that there is a tendency to homogenize and labialize large groups of third world women through constructed monolithic terms and classifications: “universal images of Third World woman: the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, etc.” (81). These images, according to Mohanty “exist in universal, ahistorical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding, and maintaining existing First/Third World connections” (81). Mohanty addresses that most of the western scholarship looked at gender as non-racialized and non-classed and deemed third world women as passive victims who possess no agency and have no power. According to this understanding, feminism is defined purely in gendered terms, assuming that the consciousness of being “women” is outside of race, class, nation, or sexuality. Her essay examines a selection of texts written by Western women about so-called “third world” women which codifies scholarly writings that assists in colonizing and ghettoizing non-Western “third world” women as collective others (61). She criticizes and challenges such discourses of over-generalization and calls it a “colonialist move” (78). Mohanty states that this body of writing ignores diversity among women. Hence, she encourages writers to take into account the actual lived experiences and narratives of these women as a key to move forward from scholarship to activism – a call that finds its way to current Arabic fictional texts that provide distinctive narratives in which women’s oppression is looked at in a multi-faceted model, including race, class, nationality, education, language... etc.

This call for diversity and defeating essentialism is also shared by other feminists such as Judith Butler who criticizes the Western feminism model for its tendency to colonize,

appropriate, and omit specific differences of non-Western cultures, and to naturalize the Western models of oppression and the fight against them. Butler illustrates that this kind of representation leads to constructing a “Third World” or “Orient” category in which gender oppression is directly or indirectly explained as an indicative of an “essential, non-Western barbarism” (6). As many non-Western feminists demand, Butler insists on avoiding any generalization such as the misleading universal women or men identity, and that any gender analysis should be contextualized in its historical, racial, class, and cultural context (7). These demands paved the way to the expansion of the notion of intersectionality, popularized by Kimberle Crenshaw in her famous article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” and enhanced in the 1970’s and 1980’s in Black women’s writings.

Intersectionality may be defined as “a theory to analyze how social and cultural categories intertwine” in which “the relationships between gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class and nationality are examined” (Knudsen 61). These relationships are multilayered resulting in an intersected form of oppression that, for example, does not only identify gender as the main source of oppression, but also examines race, class, and ethnicity as other contributing factors. When examining cases of violence against women of color, Crenshaw argues that it is not sufficient to analyze them through the lens of gender or race separately, rather, it is important to analyze them intersectionally. One can notice how this awareness is forming in the treatment of working-class female characters in contemporary Arabic fiction. More texts now tend to examine the situation of these characters within contextual elements of color, class, and language, besides gender.

The analysis in this chapter and the following one will consider this notion of intersectionality to examine representations and themes involving domestic workers in

contemporary Arabic novels. The focus in these chapters will be on novels written in after 2000. These novels represent local domestic workers of different categories, such as enslaved females or live-in rural servants. Most of these texts are set in the period of modern servitude during the *nahda* and the end of the Ottoman Empire, where socio-economic structures in the Arabic-speaking world was based on the feudal system and the model of extended families. Some texts expand the temporal period until after the abolition of slavery and the transition to modern lifestyles and socio-economic structures that are based on the capitalist/ global system and nuclear families. Such a temporal expansion enables the narrative to display the socio-economic transition and how it affected these communities and individuals. Slavery, labor and sexual exploitation, class and race tensions are among the most common themes in these novels since the majority of them take place in large houses and depict the social struggle within these domestic spheres. This chapter, particularly, focuses on the intersection of gender, color, and slavery in Arabic literature. Before delving into analyzing the chosen novels, I find it significantly useful to conduct a general survey on scholarly literature on modern slavery in the Arabic-speaking world and its relationship with race and color. I will then analyze four novels within the theme of Blackness and slavery: Omaima al-Khamis' *al-Bahriyyat*, Noura al-Ghamdi's *Wujhat al-Bausala*, Najwa Bin Shatwan's *Zarayib al-Abeed*, and Khalid al-Bassam's *Thaman al-Mulh*.

## 2. Slavery and Blackness in the Arab-speaking World: A Survey of Literature

It is probably true to say that for every gallon of ink that has been spilt on the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its consequences, only one very small drop has been spilt on the study of the forced migration of Black Africans into the Mediterranean world of Islam and the broader question of slavery within Muslim societies. (Hunwick ix)

“Black-skin Issues”- March 2019 is possibly the first conference to be devoted to discuss the representations of Blacks in Arabic fiction. The conference was held in Tunisia as the second Annual Arabic Novel Conference organized by the newly-established *Las Maison du Roman*. The guest of honor for the conference was the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury who delivered the conference keynote; stating in a similar style to the ill-advised slogan “all lives matter,” “Slavery did not end because we are all slaves to oppression” (Kareem). Such a misleading, perilous statement connotes, to say the least, a total neglect and ignorance of the history of slavery and racism in the Arabic-speaking world. It equates all kinds of oppression and removes focus from the specific suffering of Black people. The fact that this conference is the first to be held on this subject in Arabic literature is in itself an indicator of the long silence about racism and slavery in the Arabic-speaking world although it can still be seen as a sign of beginning of a tradition of scholarly writings about this issue. Another striking and indicative fact about this conference is the title of one its panels: Black writer, White reader – referring to Frantz Fanon’s renowned book *Black Skin White Masks*. This reference sounds bizarre because it evokes questionable issues about Arabness and ethnicity. If the presumed “White Reader” in this title is Arab, then many questions arise about the identification with the “white” ethnicity. In her commentary article on the conference, Mona Kareem illustrates, “It was clear how the Arab fixation on black skin functions as an erasure of race, therefore assuming Arab is white” (“Arabic Literature”). The conference also tackles issues of slavery and Black African diaspora in the Arabic-speaking world, but, according to Kareem, concepts such as racism, Blackness, and slavery were not crystallized yet in the discourse of the conference.

One might feel comfortable to state that the history of anti-Black racism and slavery in the Arabic-speaking world is not written yet. There are some signs that these subjects have begun

to receive some attention particularly in North Africa, where scholars started to recognize the need to investigate slavery and the history of Black communities in order to comprehend the national history and identity of these African states. However, the majority of these scholarly works are not written in Arabic (Hunwick and Powell xi). Most of the materials available on slavery and race in the Arab and Islamic world, as Eve Powell remarks, are written by European abolitionists in the nineteenth century when slavery became an international human rights matter. These abolitionists, according to Powell, tend to put all kinds of slavery in one category with no distinctions between, say, plantation slavery known in the United States and the domestic and military slavery known in the Muslim world. Powell asserts that examining the motives and observations of these European authors is necessary because most of them were hostile towards Muslims and Arabs. Additionally, most were advocates of colonization, believing it to be a salvation for enslaved people (Hunwick and Powell xxv). As I attempt to conduct a sweeping survey on these concepts for the purpose of contextualizing my analysis in this chapter, I am stunned by the scarcity of Arabic language based resources on anti-Black racism and slavery, and by the justificatory manner and the apologetic discourse towards these issues. Several historians who write in English about slavery in the Arab world observe, as well, that slavery was not a considerable area of focus until recently. Terence Walz and Kenneth Cuno in their introduction to the collection *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* address several reasons for this shortage in scholarly work on these subjects. One of which is the lack of any experience in modern Arab history that resembles the experience of the traumatic American slavery, which divided the nation and caused a civil war. The aftermath of this war left a heavy legacy of racial issues in American politics and ignited a national debate on subjects of race and slavery. Walz and Cuno also discuss other reasons such as the tendency to wipe out the voices of minorities

and marginal populations within Arab societies, as well as the lack of proper information, data, and historical materials that can help scholars to conduct their research (1-2). John Hunwick and Eve Powell also refer to this national erasure, or the attitude of “the less said the better” (x) in dealing with the relations of Arabs and sub-Saharan Africa and other populations that constituted the supplies of the slave trade. That is, Arab national discourse and the elites who produce them tend to erase the history of slavery in order to avoid conflicts, especially after the emancipation of enslaved people who often did not migrate back to their original countries and thus became part of the social thread of regions to where they had been forcibly brought. Hunwick points out that a vast number of formerly enslaved individuals have successfully integrated into these societies to the point that they find no cultural need to question their remote past or present social status (xii). He explains the distinctive nature of slavery in the Arab and Muslim world regarding kinship and familial life and how it is inaccurate to compare it to the modern Western slavery. He illustrates that slave owners in the Ottoman empire of the nineteenth century, for example, were directly descended from, or married to, formerly enslaved Caucasian women of the Balkans (Hunwick and Powell xxv), with these relationships with enslaved persons being open and legally acknowledged. In addition, Arab societies hold in great respect the Islamic ideals that assert the equality of all peoples regardless of their color or ethnicity, despite the fact that these societies fall far short of these Quranically based ideals.

Furthermore, Hunwick and Powell allude to the apologetic language of Arab/Muslim scholars who keep asserting the mildness of slavery in the Arab world in contrast to the modern Western slavery, “it was always more useful to depict the enslavement of black Africans as a uniquely European sin” (x). I encountered this apologetic attitude in many Arabic resources on slavery such as Hilal’s *Slaves in Egypt in the Nineteenth Century* and Turmanini’s *Slavery: its*

*Past and Present*; the authors repeatedly remind the readers that Islamic teachings introduce a progressive attitude towards enslaved people by encouraging kind treatment and emancipation in contrast to the Western system of slavery. Following the same logic of comparing the ideals of one society to the actual practices of others, some scholars tend to introduce Arabs and Muslims as color-blind and free of race-prejudiced people because Islam calls for equality among people.

Slavery and anti-Black racism within the Arab context need to be tackled with caution and more contextualizing. Whereas comparisons, and not “contrasts,” to other forms of slavery is significant and inevitable in order to understand the international slavery system, as Hunwick puts it, it is also important that scholars be careful not to judge slavery in the Arab world based on assumptions that are taken from other contexts. Hunwick asserts that in order to better understand the Arab system of slavery, we should take into account other considerations such as the commonalities in Arab and Muslim societies in regards to the diversity in religions and doctrines, and the differences that are stemmed from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as well as the economic and political conditions (Hunwick xi).

Despite all these differences, Islamic theory on slavery is one of the most significant aspects to understand the slavery system in the Arab and Muslim world. Although it is important not to confuse Islam as a religion and a set of ethics and regulations with the actual practices of its followers, we need to acknowledge that Islamic theory must have influenced the attitude of Muslim slave owners towards slavery and racism. The majority of these owners belong to upper and middle-class communities who are expected to be educated and taught Islamic ideals since childhood (Hunwick xiv). Indeed, it is erroneous to assume that all Arabs are Muslims or, if Muslim, devoted to religion, but it is also important not to dismiss the widespread Islamic ideals even among non-Muslim populations who lived in Muslim lands.



Slavery was widely practiced among Arabs of the pre-Islam era as well as among other communities of the early medieval world. Black and non-Black people at these times were used for slavery, including native Arabs. Zayd Bin Harithah, who was later adopted as a son of the Prophet Muhammad, is one example of an Arab enslaved individual. Nowhere does Islam advocates or justifies slavery. Islam does, however, acknowledge slavery's existence as an international social system that cannot be eradicated from one side. The Quranic and hadith texts on slavery, taken as a whole, seem to advocate a gradual elimination of the practice of slavery; at least this is how Muslims of twentieth-century reformist tendencies see it. Classical Islamic jurists worked to confine the practice of enslaving free people to non-believers who were bought beyond the Islamic borders, or captives of war who refused to accept Islam. Slavery in this case is considered a temporary status that results in individuals losing their legal capacity. It is, as well, one way to encourage these individuals to convert to Islam (Turmanini 32). Many Quranic texts speak of various ways in which slaves can be set free, as an act of piety or redemption from sins such as accidental killing or the breaking of an oath. For example, the Quranic verse 4:92 declares, "A believer should not kill a believer unless accidentally. Whoever kills a believer accidentally must set free a believing slave." Quran often refers to enslaved people as "*ma malakat aymanukum*" ("those whose your right hand owns"), and not as slaves "abid" or "ibad." In fact, the latter terms for "slave" are actually positively inflected terms used repeatedly in Quranic discourse to refer to worshipers of God. In his Farewell Sermon, and many other hadiths, Prophet Muhammad emphasizes, as well, the principles of equality among Arab and non-Arab people alike. Indeed, the Prophet's biography (*sirah*) shows a practical application of the principles of equality between Muslims and the thoughtful treatment of former enslaved people who entered Islam. Besides Zayd bin Harithah, who the prophet adopted as his son, Bilal ibn Ribah, a Black

formerly enslaved man, was appointed by the Prophet as the first Muezzin – the person who rises the call for prayers. Islamic history tells about several accounts that illustrate the moderate attitude towards enslaved people in the era of *sadr al-Islam* (which covers the life of Prophet Muhammad and the four major caliphs that followed him). This does not mean that all early Muslim behavior rose to the ideals enshrined in the Quran and hadith. Arabs and Muslims in the following era violated Islamic ideals in favor of economic profits gained from the slave trade (*nikhasa*), which flourished during the era of Muslim conquests (632-661). The Abbasid era (750-1258) saw an increase in enslaved populations due to the massive wealth that characterizes that era of Muslim history. That is also when harsh treatment of enslaved people led to one of the major uprisings by a group of enslaved Bantu people, known as the Zanj Revolt (879-883) under the lead of Ali bin Muhammad (As-Samer 26-28). Slavery roles in the Muslim world varied from domestic work and menial jobs to highest-ranking positions in the government. The mothers of many, if not most, of the Abbasid caliphs, such as Harun al-Rashid and al-Hadi, were enslaved women (*jawari*) taken as concubines (As-Samer 20). Formerly enslaved groups established one of the greatest empires, the Mamluk Sultanate (1250- 1517) that spanned Egypt, the Levant, Iraq, and the Hijaz.

While slavery in the Arab world forms a huge area for research, two other related issues also need further investigation: the association, in modern Arabic culture, of Blackness with enslavement, and Arab anti-Blackness. On the subject of anti-Black racism, the Arabic discourse seems ambivalent. One cannot, on the one hand, overlook the many ramifications of color prejudice in both ancient and modern Arabic cultures. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that there is little clear evidence of legalized, institutional anti-Black racism, not to ignore the complex issue of the body of Arabic literature that praises Black people, such as

Jahiz's ninth-century treatise, *Fakhr al-Sudan 'ala al-bidan* ("The Merits of the Blacks over the Whites"). Although the Quran does not raise any awareness of color prejudice, there are excessive indications in the early periods of Islam and around the Umayyad and Abbasid eras that reveal a sense of color preferences. Interestingly, these preferences are neither Blacks nor whites. Bernard Lewis illustrates that the concept of color in early Arabic poetry is very instructive (7). He explains that there is a wider range to describe human colors in this poetry than, say, what is customary in current Western culture. According to Lewis, "Human beings are frequently described by words which we might translate as black, white, red, green, yellow, and two shades of brown, one lighter and one darker" (7). More importantly, Lewis remarks that these terms are usually used in a personal manner rather than in an ethnic sense, which implies that systematic anti-Black racism did not exist in these periods of the Arab history. Lewis demonstrates that the diversity of colors used by Arab poets of the early Islamic era "would correspond to such words as swarthy, sallow, blond or ruddy in our own modern usage more than to words like black and white" (Lewis 78). This passage by A.J. Toynbee is worth highlighting in this context to help in understanding the Arabs racial attitude:

The primitive Arabs who were the ruling element in the Umayyad Caliphate called themselves 'the swarthy people,' with a connotation of racial superiority, and their Persian and Turkish subjects 'the ruddy people,' with a connotation of racial inferiority. That is to say, they drew the same distinction that we draw between blondes and brunettes but reversed the values which we assign to the two shades of white. (qtd. in. Lewis 1)

Such statements lead one to believe that Arabs' prejudice regarding color in early Islam and mediaeval times, although undeniable, is not specifically directed to Black people. Rather, it is an attitude that targets difference regardless of the ethnicity. Just like any other community, Arabs deem themselves superiors, thus, Black and white are both inferiors to them. In fact, contemporary music and popular culture in the Arab world is saturated with references that favor

swarthinness/*samar* and introduce it as the ultimate beauty. A popular song by the legendary Abdel Halim Hafez says, آه يا اسمراني اللون حبيبي الأسمراني (Oh, my *asmar*-colored beloved). Abdel Karim Abul Qadir, a well-known Kuwaiti singer, also sings, آه يالاسمر يا زين، حبك أسرني ودلالك غير (Oh, beautiful *asmar*, I am a prisoner of your love). These references indicate that the modern Arabic discourse tends to eliminate the sense of racial differences. Some observers believe that prejudice against darker skin, or more precisely, preferring whiteness over shades of browns in Arabic culture is a modern phenomenon that occurs as an influence of the white supremacy discourse of colonization, as well as one cultural impacts of Hollywood regarding the depictions of beauty standards (Rogers 97). This is not to deny the other side of the picture, or the materials that reveal more prejudice towards Blackness, but to explain the ambivalent nature of the Arab racial attitude.

Regarding slavery and whether it is connected to Blackness in the Arabic-speaking world, it should also be clarified that enslaved people were not of one particular color or ethnicity. Among them were Europeans “Slavs,” Turks, Greeks, Caucasians, and Indians (Hunwick and Powell xix). Hunwick highlights that certain stereotypes were associated, in Arabic discourses, with different groups of enslaved people, although it is not clear in what time period he places these stereotypes, He illustrates,

Central Asian Turkic peoples were considered amenable to military duties; males from the Indian subcontinent were thought trustworthy with and good with money, though their women were said to pine away in captivity; women of the Caucasus were highly prized as concubines and often eventually wives; Ethiopian women were likewise prized, especially in Arabia, and Nubian women in Egypt, East African men (Zanj) were considered good laborers and their womenfolk good for menial household tasks or as wet-nurses. (xviii)

Despite this diversity, Black Africa remains the oldest and the last source of slavery for the Arab world. Positive views on Black people found in some Arabic literature are countered

with a massive body of ethnographic and geographical literature that reveals rooted racism against Blacks and deems them as the least civilized, savage idolaters, and beast-like animals (Wynter 20). The seven-clime theory that divides people based on the construction of the world climate zones might be one of this literature that is loaded with racial prejudice against both black and white societies. What is worth noticing about this theory is that it reveals racial biases against white people as much as the Blacks. Most of these concepts, however, are based on ancient Greek texts that became mainstream knowledge in medieval Europe, due to their being transmitted by Arabs who had translated them beginning in the Abbasid eighth century. The seven-clime theory thus surfaces as accepted knowledge in Arabic culture, as it absorbs Greek material. The theory attributes certain characteristics of people to geographical features. The middle region of the world which the Greeks – and the Abbasids – inhabited was believed to be the most “moderate” region in terms of temperature and distance from the sun. This moderation was then extended to the people of those regions as well, as they were deemed the most civilized, ethical, and logical. By contrast, the farther southern and northern hemispheres were either too hot or too cold, which produced people who were mentally and physically distorted. The whiteness of northern societies is deemed, according to this hypothesis, as a flaw. White people are believed to be emerged from their mothers’ wombs as “raw,” or “uncooked pastry” due to the lack of heat, whereas Blackness of people of the south is explained as they are “thoroughly cooked as to be burnt” because of the exposure to excessive heat (al-Azmeh 9). Although people of the north and the south were deemed equally savage, and although the Abbasids regularly received, via Viking trade, slaves from the far north, the Arabs had more contact with southern lands of Black Africa, thus consolidating the inferiority of Black Africans and further associating them with slavery and savageness (Hunwick xix, Kazim 231, al-Azmeh 9-10).

Nader Kazim is one of the few Arabic scholars who digs into the structural and historical roots of color biases and anti-Black racism in Arabic discourses. In his groundbreaking book *Representations of the Other*, Kazim argues that what distinguishes representations of Blackness in Arabic discourse, unlike the representations of other nations such as the Chinese, Indians, and Persians, is the coherency, frequency and continuity. In this book, and following Said's model in *Orientalism*, Kazim develops a theory on Africanism *Istifraq*/استفراق to investigate the representations of Blacks in the Arab discourse of the medieval Islamic era. Parallel to Said's groundbreaking work, Kazim examines a vast Arab and Muslim heritage consisting of history, literature, religious texts, poetry, folk tales and popular culture including dream interpretation, myths, proverbs, and linguistic and cultural references. Benefiting from the theoretical progress in fields of philosophy, cultural studies, representations, and otherness, Kazim illustrates that massive historical references and cultural patterns have played a major role in guiding the collective Arab imagination and forming ahistorical defamatory images of Black people. Such references and patterns set Blacks as an essential Other to Arabs, whether in terms of color, race, the degree of urbanization, language, religion and even in their humanity. That is, despite the Quran and the hadith, many Arabic cultural texts evince the belief that Blacks are not complete human beings, but rather, intermediate beings between animals and humans (163). Kazim explained this tendency of Arabs to differentiate themselves from Blacks as an attempt to shape their distinctive identity and maintain their superiority, especially when Arab-Muslim civilization reaches its golden era during the Abbasid caliphate (775-861). Further, he suggests that Arabs at that time need to maintain this contradiction in order to justify the continuity of the slavery system and the cruel treatment of Black people within that system. This differentiation, he asserts, was of particular benefit to Muslim Arabs in order to mitigate the burden of guilt.

Muslims understood that Islamic teachings of Quran and hadith honor all human beings and commits its followers to the principles of justice and equality of people regardless of their colors, origins, and languages. Hence, there was a need for an extreme difference between Arabs and Blacks so that the Islamic notion of ‘humanity’ is not at stake and can be disregarded. In their contact with other nations, Arabs in the medieval Islamic era observed that Indians, Chinese, and Persians, to name a few, have some similarities with them such as color and civilization which includes religions, ethics and knowledge. In the case of Black Africa, these similarities were eliminated due to the differences in religions, rituals, languages, color, lifestyle, and even habits of clothing. Because Arabs of these eras which Kazim treats do not find common denominators with Blacks, the latter became the easiest target for alienation and differentiation. Based on this otherness, Arabs built a huge archive of images, symbols, and perceptions that emphasize the marginalization and degeneration of Blacks, as well as stereotypes of Black vitality, obscenity, and exoticism (163).

The discourse around Blacks in the Arab world is ambivalent, to say the least. Negative perceptions of Blacks were further reinforced, according to Kazim, by the unstable relationship between Arabs and Africans that shifted between phases of conflict and harmony depending on political and historical circumstances that extend back to the pre-Islamic era. Among the historical elements of differentiation discussed by Kazim are religion, ethnicity, and what Arabs called the “white lineage,” “*al-Jibillatu al-Baydha*.” In terms of religion, the majority of Arabs were Jews in Yemen and pagans in Mecca, whereas Christianity was common in Abyssinia. Many conflicts between Arabs and Black Africans, such as the story of “people of the ditch,” or *as’hab al-ukhdud* (520/ 523 CE), and the conquest of Abraha the Abyssinian on Mecca in the Year of the Elephant (570 CE), were based on this religious difference as Kazim addresses in

more detail (62-66). Kazim does not explain why the Arabic discourses he treats seem to erase the cultural memory of the Abyssinian Empire which has a positive presence in the consciousness of the early Muslim community. In terms of the ethnic struggle, Kazim argues that later Arabic discourses portray this struggle as rooted in conflict between sons of Sam (Arabs and Hebrews) and sons of Ham (Blacks). While this matter of ethnicity stemming from the sons of Noah is entirely missing from the Quran, it is heavily present in the Bible (e.g. Chronicles 14:12-13) and in biblical matter which finds its way into Arabic culture. One of the most influential biblical stories on the division of ethnicities is the story of the “curse of Ham,” the son of Noah. The Bible says, “When Noah awoke from his drunkenness and learned what his youngest son had done to him, he said, “Cursed be Canaan! A servant of servants shall he be to his brothers” (Genesis 9: 25). Although there is no mention of race or color in this biblical verse, it is interpreted by communities of Jews, Christians and, later, Muslims as justification for the association of black skin color with slavery. These commentators, according to Kazim, re-employ this narrative to fit the cultural mode, adding that the curse also includes Blackness. Other narratives mention that the reason of the curse is that Ham had sex with his wife on the ark. Both interpretations can be linked to medieval Arabic discourses’ negative perceptions of Blacks, including their hyper-sexuality, susceptibility to enslavement, and their uncivilized nature (Kazim 218-231). This myth enters Muslim discourse through the *israeliyyat* (a term that developed to refer to narratives originating from Jewish and Christian, which enter into Islamic discourse as apocryphal yet generally well-received), and *qisasa al-anbiya* (“stories of the prophets,” which also originate from Jewish and Christian matter). The biblically sourced anti-Blackness rationale contests the aforementioned seven-clime theory. The seven-clime idea, Kazim highlights, ascends among medieval Arab knowledge producers who attempt to adopt



more secular, or “rational” approaches such as Ibn-Khuldun, al-Biruni, al-Idrisi, and al-Razi (231-255).

If these concocted religious and ethnic bases were not enough to draw a sharp distinction between Arabs and Black Africans, another concept emerges. Kazim illustrates that medieval Arabic discourse attributes to the sixth-century Yemeni king, Sayf ibn Dhi-Yazan, an imaginative racial kinship that links Arabs more closely to fairer-skinned people and separates them from darker-skinned ones. Sayf is said to have created the concept of *al-jibillatu al-baydha* (the white-skinned kin-related) in his appeal to the king of the Sasanian Empire Khosrau I, to find a common denominator and win his alliance against the Abyssinian Empire. Sayf claims to identify with Persians because he is closer in color to them than he is to the Abyssinians. Kazim remarks that it is obvious that Sayf ibn Dhi-Yazan is not fair-skinned like the Persians, but not dark-skinned like the Abyssinians either. However, Khosrau I accepts that logic that there is one degree of tone difference between him and Dhi-Yazan verses two degrees of difference with the Abyssinian (Kazim 66). The myth of Arab “whiteness” and Arab difference from “Blackness” might be traced to the moment when Sayf’s story begins to surface in Arabic discourses, Kazim’s findings suggest (72). Until now, “whiteness” is casually used among fair-skinned Arabs as they consider themselves, or refer to fairer-skinned or ‘white’ regardless of their ethnic origins, and despite the fact that Arabs come from vastly varied ethnic backgrounds and have a wide range of skin colors.

These historical conflicts between Arabs and Blacks and people of the *Habasha* (modern day Eritrea and Ethiopia) are embedded in the collective Arab imagination. There was a shift to the discourse of tolerance and coexistence during the early Islamic era that was strengthened by the migration of the first Muslims to Abyssinia (the first Hegira). However, the Abbasid slave

trade, in addition to other significant developments such as the Zanj Revolt, contribute to negative Arab perceptions of Blacks and form the stereotypical images prevalent in the eras that followed (Kazim 58). For example, Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) in his *Muqaddimah* states that, “the only people who accept slavery are the Negroes, owing to their low degree of humanity and proximity to the animal stage” (Ibn Khaldun. qtd. in. Lewis 38).

Stereotypes are, by their very nature, reductionist and selective. They are formed by taking a simple recognized characterization about a person or a group of people and reducing them to that specific trait, while also employing a strategy of binaries that divides between the normal and the abnormal. Stereotypes also tend to occur when there are massive inequalities of power (Hall 258). Accordingly, medieval Arab accounts of Blacks spring from this logic of categorization and rules of representation, and thus, the names of some of the indigenous peoples of Africa such as *Zanj* and *Habasha* were made “into interchangeable mobile classificatory labels” (Wynter 20). Sylvia Wynter traces these stereotypes in the context of Christopher Columbus’ conquest that changed the ethnic compositions between Europe, America, and Africa. Old concepts of the seven-clime theory and the Aristotelian “Natural Slave,” she claims, regenerate themselves within the modern secular era. The trans-Atlantic Western slavery discourse attempted to justify this system through re-inviting such symbolic constructs from the feudal Christian order, which were based on caste, to the new construct of race (Wynter 34)

Consequently, the modern Arab consciousness towards slavery and anti-Black racism also regenerated these concepts, albeit in different manifestations. Until today, this rhetoric is still popular. *Abd* (f. *abda*), literally meaning “slave,” is one of the derogatory words widely used as a slur to address Black people in daily life conversations in the Arabic-speaking-world whether they are related to slavery or not<sup>8</sup>. In 2014, for instance, Nawal al-Hawsawi, a Saudi

female pilot and a Black woman sued three local women who called her “*abda*” (“Saudi Female Pilot”). Al-Hawsawi is the first Black person in Saudi Arabia to take legal actions against the use of such slurs. She launched a social media campaign that sparked a national conversation on racism and encouraged the state to become stricter towards such issues. Due to the spread of awareness, familiarity of linguistic terms, and relative availability of official channels, such racism is no longer expressed freely without consequences or at least some resistance. Recently, this racist term is beginning to face more rejection and social activism (Bahri 135). Literature and fiction are one form of this activism against Arab anti-Black racism, although much of modern Arabic literature does not totally rid itself from insensitivity towards racism, as will be discussed in this chapter.

### 3. Blackness and Slavery in Contemporary Arabic Fiction.

Modern slavery<sup>9</sup> in the Arabic-speaking-world is not confined to Blackness<sup>10</sup>. However, in the novels I reviewed for this study, it mainly is. Every female enslaved character in these novels is a Black character. The discourse of these novels implicates the very notion of intersectionality through the emphasis on gender and color combined as factors that determine individuals’ status in familial milieus. Fictional households and domesticity in these texts are perceived as heteropatriarchal foundations that privilege upper-class males and light-skinned men and women while suppressing lower-class and dark-skinned men and women. Systematic racism and gendered division of labor are originated and enhanced at these private spheres where individuals learn social principles and recognize hierarchies.

Before delving into an analysis of the representations of anti-Black racism in these texts, it would be useful to explain that the terms describing color in most of these novels can be misleading. Many characters in these novels are described as “whites,” *Abyadh* (m.)/*baydha* (f.),

which raises many questions regarding the social structure of color in the societies they depict and the values and preferences of “Black” and “white.” It can be understood from the content of many texts that “white” does not mean Caucasian white, because Arabs are characterized by their brownness (Rogers 95). They are typically referred to, and they refer to themselves, using a variety of brown’s shades such as (*sumr*/سمر) or (*huntiyoona*/حنطيون), whereas “white” can be used loosely to refer to lighter shades of brownness (*samar*/سمار-سمرة). Thus, what might be seen as a chaotic method of applying these terms of whiteness or references to fair skin, could also be read as a sign of a loose Arab attitude towards race.

### 3.1 *Al-Bahrayyat*: Slavery, Blackness and Domestic Hierarchy

*Al-Bahriyyat* (2006) by Omaima Alkhamis depicts this domestic hierarchy by focusing on the structure of private spheres and how roles and responsibilities are distributed based on gender, kinship, ethnicity, religion, and even age. The novel is set in old Najd - now Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia - and it begins around the time of the establishment of the modern Saudi state and expands this temporal frame until recent time of the oil boom (1973). It focuses on the structure, the hierarchy of power, social tension within private spheres, and how these private spheres reacted to and were influenced by modernization in the public sphere. Although slavery is not the main theme of the novel, it is conceived as a natural element of familial and social life at the time. The novel provides a space of spontaneous interaction between the characters. Due to its dialogical style, *al-Bahriyyat*, unlike other texts in this section, is not primarily concerned with condemning, judging, or advocating for this social phenomenon as much as attempting to provide a space of multiplicity of voices and stories to depict a realistic image of that society. Most of the characters have the capacity to develop, speak, and interact without the crude intervention of the third-person narrator. Further, the narrative treats the aspect

of color in a sensitive manner that shows how different shades of Blackness and fairness can determine the status of a female slave and whether she fits for marriage, sex, or only for domestic work. However, we can still note some insensitive attitude regarding Blackness as will be explained in the following analysis.

The novel narrates the story of Baheeja, a young woman from the Levant who was brought as a gift to the king, who donated her to his minister Abu Salih, whom in his turn, married her off to his son Salih. Baheeja lives in the huge house of al-Mu'abbil, which is full of female slaves of different colors and origins, Abu Salih's sons and their wives and children, as well as his own wives and concubines. The narrative follows Baheeja's life in this rigid environment that oppresses strangers and never tolerates differences. Besides Baheeja, the narrative also follows a closely-knit series of stories about the other male and female inhabitants of the house, including wives and enslaved women, which enables the narrative to perfectly depict the social tension in this extended family. There is a high awareness of the hierarchy in the novel that at one point the narrative pauses in order to sketch the familial pyramid of power,

There is a hierarchical structure that everyone should surrender under its arch: first, there is the father, the lion, the protector of the den, followed by his sons, the males who represent the prestige and the exterior front of the house. Inside the house, there are the women; first is the old mother *um al-eyal* أم العيال who is usually the mediator, who abandons her femininity in order to obtain some privileges and patriarchal power. She is usually the first wife who acquired a sanctity through years of companionship and knowledge of the hidden rules of the house which she contributed to forming. Then come the new wives and wives of sons and a crowd of children and servants [my own translation]. (56)

This passage explains the general scale of power in the private sphere that is basically based on gender and kinship. However, the scale contains finer degrees of differentiation and discrimination across color, nationality, age, and religion. The narrative depicts, for instance, how older women of kinship oppress younger and non-relative women such as the case of Umm

Salih, the first old wife of Abu Salih who oppresses Baheeja, the young and second wife of her son, who is brought from Syria, and Meryama, the Abyssinian concubine of Abu Salih. These relationships of power inside the family depict a time when families included ‘wives’ of different range and status depending on their color, age, and ethnicity<sup>11</sup>.

To limit this discussion within the slavery and its connection with color, we might compare the situation of three female characters in the novel: the fair-skinned Baheeja, the Abyssinian Meryama, and the Black Umm Suroor. The three women are all brought to the family through a form of slavery, mostly as gifts from the king. Abu Salih is a wealthy merchant who is close to circles of power and it is more likely for members of these circles to strengthen their trade relations through such gifting traditions. The three women are initially a property of Abu Salih’s family. However, it is clear that their ethnicity and color difference determines their status in the family. Because Baheeja is fair-skinned and young woman, she is fit for marriage and reproduction, hence she is married off to Salih, the eldest son of Abu Salih. She has no agency and she suffers greatly in the beginning from Umm Salih persecuting and infantilizing her because of her age, color, and even different worshiping habits, but she manages eventually to gain a position of power and learns that the persecution of those who are weaker is the way to gain respect in such an environment. Baheeja’s complexion that is described in the text as being too bright, “بهيجة الفاقعة ببشرتها البيضاء وشعرها الفاتح” (9) also plays a role in her struggle. Indeed, her very fairness, which is typically a privilege in the Western culture and in many other parts of the world, becomes a stigma positioning her in the midst of intersecting discourse of subjugation. She is deemed as different, less beautiful than the other women around the house who are darker-skinned. Even one of her sons is always bullied by other children and is called “a tomato” because of his skin-tone (32). This treatment of color echoes the aforementioned discussion on

colorism within modern Arabic discourse. That is, color intolerance of Arabs is typically directed at differences in general and not exclusively on Blackness.

Meryama, on the other hand, is Abyssinia - a group stereotyped for their dark-brown preferred color-tone and hypersexuality. Therefore, Meryama is used by Abu Salih for sexual pleasure as a concubine. Although this position gives her privilege as a favored woman by the master of house, she is conceived to be a mere sex toy by the other women. Even her daughters from Abu Salih are treated with contempt by their peers. One more aspect that contributes to her inferiority is her Christian faith that she painfully keeps as a secret. She performs the Muslims' prayers and other rituals as a shelter from additional oppression. Umm Suroor comes at the bottom of this social scale. All what we know about her is that she is a Black and unpleasant-looking enslaved female who helps women of the house with house chores, but can sometimes be a sexual outlet for the strange occasional desires of Abu Salih. Anytime he plans to have sex with her, he asks his wife Um Slaih to prepare her and clean her up – a cleansing ritual that does not happen with other women or concubines of Abu Slaih's harem, revealing the inferior view of Blackness. The language of the narrative becomes extremely racist as it portrays Umm Suroor and describes the scene of her sex with Abu Salih,

As Abu Salih sometimes desires to eat raw liver after slaughtering a lamb, he desires to have sex with the slave Umm Suroor, who bakes the bread and milks the cows. He would ask Umm Salih to prepare and bathe the slave in the night and send her to him in the roof of the northern house. Umm Salih would scrub the slave's body with a loofah and wash her hair with a foam of *sidr*, and then she would dresses her clean clothes, sprays the worst kind of perfumes on her body and ask her to carry the dinner to Abu Salih in the surface... Her [Umm Suroor] mooing, as she is under Abu Saleh, provokes all that is long have died in him, As for her black, tight skin ... the sheikh returns to his youth. (51-52)

Clearly, this passage reveals a subtle anti-Black racism in portraying the character of Umm Suroor. It hyper-sexualizes her and identifies her with animals. Umm Suroor is mentioned only in

association with dirt, animal, bad smell, and weird taste such as eating animals' raw liver. Even her "sound" during sex are described as a cow's moo. Not to mention the narrative's hint to her naivetés, which Umm Slaih exploits by fooling her with the "worst kinds of perfumes" in order to make her un-pleasant to Abu Salih. The narrative also hints to the common stereotypes of Black people as being sexually addicted as will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Skin color in these women's situations play a major role to determine their status. The situation of these three women, and other women in the novel, illustrates the very notion of systematic hierarchy of familial lives. *Al-Bahriyyat* provides a scenario where individuals interpellate, to use Althusserian' terms, their imaginary roles. The novel is an exemplary narrative of the social ideological apparatus that regulates individuals' relations and positions. In his influential theory of ideology, Althusser proposes that ideology is what "relates men and women to their condition of existence, and to each other, in the division of their tasks and the equality or inequality of their lot" (305). According to Althusser, ideology in classed societies serves not only to assist people to live their roles and perform their assigned tasks but also to endure their conditions (305). In *al-Bahriyyat*, class rules and roles are non-verbalized, but they are depicted as normalized patterns through the interaction of the characters. The narrative is not concern with challenging these roles as much as narrating the story of the society in where they grow. Even Umm Salih, who is characterized as a powerful woman, despite her bitterness that leaks through the narrative sometimes, cannot object the unfair situation of sharing her husband with tens of women nor rejects tasks assigned to her such as preparing her female servants to have sex with her husband. People in this novel do not choose their roles, they hail and interpellate to them in Althusserian sense.



### 3.2 *Wojhat al-Bawsala*: Rebel Black Women and the Battle of Survival

Contrary to this manner of interpellation in *al-Bahriyyat*, Black and enslaved female characters of other novels show more resistance to their subjectivities such as in *Wojhat al-Bawsala* (*The Direction of the Compass*- Arab Institute for Research & Publishing, 2002) by Noura al-Ghamdi. *Wojhat al-Bawsala* is a Saudi novel that tackles the intersection of gender/color/class and focuses on Blackness and fear of miscegenation as its main themes. While the novel shows that all the female characters are oppressed to one degree or another due to their gender, the narrative indicates that Black women, and members of multiracial origin face multiple levels of oppression even if they belong to the same class and family of other women. Ostensibly, slavery does not seem to be a major theme in the novel, but on the level of the structure, it is one of the subtle factors that motivates characters and affects their relationships. The novel depicts how Blackness is conceived in the context of fear of miscegenation, where it is considered as a source of contamination to the purity of families. Blackness is also portrayed as a source of social reproduction and systemic generational consequence: children of enslaved individuals are expected to inherit their parent's status and remain at the bottom of the social scale.

*Wojhat al-Bawsala* takes place in the 1990s in one of southern village of Saudi Arabia where the insider narrator tells the story of three generations of her family. The fictional timeframe expands between that year and back to the fifties of the twentieth century. The novel is a coming-of-age story of a young unnamed narrator who is sent to live with her father's cousin's extended family in their village after a dispute between her parents that leads to their divorce. She becomes a close friend with her Black cousin Fedda as they are both in a similar age, and are both parentless. Fedda's color remains a source of curiosity for the narrator until she

learns that Fedda is a second generation of an interracial relationship between one of the family's male members and his enslaved Black young woman whom he captured and raped. The novel portrays a web of social relationships and tensions through interactions between the narrator and other characters, beginning with Fedda who falls in love with the same man the narrator is in love with – the Levantine handsome doctor, Thamer. Both the narrator and Fedda, later, are forcefully married off, one after another, to the same man – their cousin Humood who is already married to his first wife Athba and has children with her. This marriage arrangement is plotted by Abdul Rahim al-Sabti, the patriarch of the family, who intends through this marriage to eradicate the Black offspring of the family. Abdul Rahim demands that his son Humood marries Fedda but shall never consummate the marriage. As a compensation for this sacrifice – which Humood does not approve since he has a settled marriage and loves his wife – his father promises to marry him off to the other cousin; the narrator: “Marry Fedda; abandon her bed and shut her mouth up. Be a man! I swear to my father's head I will make it up for you with a daughter of decent men; you will have one of our *sheikhs*' daughter if you obey me. Only wait until she grows up and blossoms [my own translation]” (195). Abdul Rahim, of course, wants to silence Fedda who shows signs of rebellion and discontinue her enslaved lineage. Despite this plan, Fedda manages to carry Humood's child without his consent. She manipulates him to have intercourse with her and “steals” his sperm. However, she dies with the baby during an obstructed labor. Her body disappears hours after the traumatic death and its mystery remains unresolved, even though the reader learns about this death from an early stage of the narrative.

The story unfolds using a non-linear narrative and cinematic effects. It begins with an intimate moment in the present time where the narrator – now a school teacher – has a soulful phone conversation with her love affair who seems more like a sentimental imagination than a

real a human being. After this short peaceful chapter, the narrator's memory fragments between events, characters, and times of the past and the present. The narrative events appear out of chronological order and overlap in many occasions. Two major events, however, are briefly mentioned at the very beginning of the narrative before the reader realizes how they are connected: first is the death of Abdul Rahim al-Sabti that happens at the present time of the narrative, and the second is the death of Fedda that happens before the time of the narrative and repeatedly recurs with additional details. We gradually learn the history of struggle between these two characters and what they represent to the narrator: Abdul Rahim is the absolute patriarchal tyranny versus the ultimate resistance represented by Fedda.

The polyphonic nature of the novel, the fluid chronotope (space and time), and the different background of the characters provides a perfect sphere to highlight different perspectives and to further question the systematic multi-layered oppression. Women in such spheres of small villages and rural environments are usually confined to supporting men, the masters, and providing them with comfort and pleasure, even if the woman herself is privileged in her feminine surroundings. These rural environments provide women with some relative freedom in terms of mobility and participation in public life. However, the dominant values in these settings remain the patriarchal values that give men, fathers and husbands, the right to own women and control their lives (al-Dhamen 326). Abdul Rahim in the novel represents the ultimate patriarchal authority and tyranny. He controls everyone's life according to his own terms. Every woman in the narrative takes her share of his tyranny. Other men fall under his control too but they still have the benefits of being superiors over women.

Patriarchy is the explicit form of tyranny in the novel. It is overtly condemned in many occasions throughout the narrative. However, racism is another hidden form of tyranny that the

narrator aims to expose through the story of her Black cousin Fedda and the secret behind her outcasted color. The narrative hints several times that it is easier to challenge patriarchy than to criticize anti-Black racism. At one point, the narrator indicates: “Why is Fedda and her color the only exceptional issue that is forbidden to be discussed or uncovered in our confined surrounding?” (al-Ghamdi 92). The narrator, nevertheless, keeps challenging these red lines and attempts to expose more details about Fedda’s story, her Blackness, as well as her mysterious vanishing that can be seen as a form of symbolic resistance. Most of the text, in fact, is written in a technique of dialogue between the narrator and Fedda although she is dead in the present time of the narrative, which means that the reader never meets her as an alive character. Nevertheless, Fedda’s voice, her story, her strong presence is sturdy and overwhelming as if the novel aims to provide a compensatory narrative that challenges the tendency of erasing Fedda and her Blackness from the history of this family.

The narrator exposes the secret of Fedda’s different and discordant color through narrating the story of her female ancestors that is linked to slavery and the family’s fear of miscegenation. This history is deemed by the family as a mistake that should not have happened. It lies in the history of three generations of Fedda’s family: the grandmother Fedda, the aunt Baraka, and finally Fedda herself, who is named after her grandmother. The narrative allows these women to speak, tell their own stories and assert their existence that wanted to be diminished. The narrative, in this sense, can be seen as a tool to cope with what Hanadi al-Samman calls the “anxiety of erasure.” In her book *Anxiety of Erasure*, al-Samman argues that modern Arab women writers are always driven in their writings by the fear that they will be erased, or in a symbolic sense, be rendered extinct, because they are conditioned to veiling and blocking on the corporal and symbolic sense (2). The anxiety of erasure, according to al-

Samman, is generated in the writer's' unconscious, and metaphorically encountered with two dominant tropes: The *wa 'd* (female infant burial), and the masterful narrator Scheherazade; the female storyteller of *One Thousand and One Night* who saves her own and other women's lives through her storytelling.

These two tropes are both employed in *Wojhat al-Bawsala*. The grandmother Fedda utilizes the magic of 'talking' and storytelling evoking Scheherazade's trope, whereas Fedda's body escapes burying; evoking the metaphor of *wa 'd*. Baraka, on the other end, uses a different feminine trope which is sewing. The three Black female characters were literally subjugated to the anxiety of erasure by al-Sabti who attempts to prevent them from the right of reproduction, but they do not passively surrender to this unjust situation. The grandmother Fedda's story is the story of challenging slavery and despotism. It is told alternatively by Baraka and the grandmother Fedda's own voice. We learn that she was a princess of a desert tribe and is kidnapped in a raid by a gang of Bedouins specialized in slave trades and led by Aboud al-Sabti-the cousin of Abdul Rahim. Fedda is painfully and repeatedly raped by Aboud and tortured by his gang such that no buyer wants to purchase her due to her miserable condition. Thus, Abdul Rahim asks his cousin to leave her in the family's house so they can use her as a slave. Fedda is more likely to be in this cycle of kidnapping, rape, enslavement because of her Blackness. After she partially heals from her physical and psychological wounds and surrenders to her new reality, Fedda manages to draw Aboud to have an affair with her which results in her having two children: Yousef and Baraka. Baraka, a daughter of Aboud and a cousin of Abdul Rahim grows up in the same household where her mother Fedda lives and dies as a slave. Like her mother, she is treated as a servant although she is a daughter of the family. When Baraka reaches the age of womanhood, Abdul Rahim decides to marry her and intends to sexually abandon her. That is

when his ethnic cleansing plan begins. He holds Baraka as an abandoned wife and ensures that she will never have children of her own. She remains a virgin and untouched for the rest of her life. The third generation is the young Fedda: Yousef's daughter, who is named after her grandmother and lives in the same house after both her parents die young. Al-Sabti plans to repeat the same scenario of Baraka with Fedda, but the two women conspire to ruin his plans. The battle of these three women is not with the patriarchal system alone, a battle they hold in common with the other women in the novel, or with racism alone like the other man of Fedda's family, Yousef. Rather, it is a survival battle because of their gender, color, and class combined.

Yousef, Baraka's brother and the other son of Fedda and Aboud, also lives as a servant-like person in relation to his natal family, but he is able to marry and have a child. Abdul Rahim does not target him the same way he targets the Black women. The narrator, who is described as a "white" "*baydha*," full-bodied young women, is given to Humood is a prize, whereas Fedda is a form of punishment only because of her color. Marrying her is a moral duty that Humood has to pay for the sake of the purity of the family's race. Other women in the novel face tyranny too; Athba has to accept her husband's second and third marriages, while Jameela, Abdul Rahim's first wife, also has to endure the same fate when he falls in love and marries his last pretty and young third wife Zeina. But the three Black women encounter sexism, classism, and racism all together that they are oppressed even by other women of the family. For instance, when Athba shows her grievance to her mother on Humood's wedding's night "Her mother pinches her thigh: [she advises her] do not show these women your weakness; women are enemies. Then who does Humood marry? A slave and a daughter of a slave ("*amah bint amah*")" (al-Ghamdi 96). The young Fedda is not a slave. She is the legitimate daughter of Yousef, a free man, and her mother

is a free woman. However, she is still called names and associated with slavery because her grandmother was enslaved.

Despite the oppression and the power of the authority – symbolized in Abdul Rahim – these three women do not passively accept the subjection and fate that is chosen for them. They fight for their existence, they celebrate their bodies through intimacy, and they seize the right to reproduce which was stripped from them. The grandmother Fedda, the first Black woman in the family of those who will be considered Black regardless of their mixed ethnicity and Arab fathers, manages to make her kidnapper desire her despite the jealousy of his female cousins. She bears him children, which is supposed to be the key to her freedom – in Islamic law, once an enslaved woman bears the master a child, her status changes to “Umm Walad,” mother of a child,” and cannot be sold. The elder Fedda utilizes the power of language as a feminine means of survival to manipulate Aboud, draw him to her bed, and make him a father of her children. The narrator says admiringly of the elder Fedda that she was “able to seduce her kidnapper and allure him with her chatter and cheerful laughter” to her end of getting pregnant (al-Ghamdi 162). The text’s use of “chatter” evokes the trope of the high-born Scheherazade telling stories to end the reign of death by her husband, King Shahrayar. Elder Fedda is herself a princess using the power of language to make life-forces triumph over the death-force of her master. Scheherazade’s trope represents the power of language and storytelling as a feminine means of salvation and liberation. Al-Ghamdi in this novel makes her protagonist Scheherazade who saves her own, and her progeny, through storytelling. Although she is enslaved, tortured, raped, and racially discriminated against, she tells the story of her own victory as she seizes her bodily survival and gains symbolic immortality through storytelling.

Despite being legally free, Baraka is treated as a family servant. She is subjugated to a vicious marriage plan to Abdul Rahim and deprived of intimacy, sex, and reproduction. She seems submissive and does not show resistance. The reader learns that she spends her long, lonely nights sewing clothes as a way of dealing with insomnia and anxiety and not for entertainment nor financial income. Rather, “she was not skilled or even showing any will to live. I don’t remember her being paid for a dress she stitched... She liked to sit by the sewing machine for hours at night. When Jameela or other women... ask her what she had accomplished all night, she is quick to take out an exquisite dress and give it to any girl of the house or the neighborhood as long as it fit her size” (142). Sewing and knitting in many cultures are associated with women as a political act. “The Six Swans,” a German folktale, for example, includes this trope of knitting as political resistance. It tells the story of a bewitched family of six brothers who were turned into swans. To break the spell, their only sister needs to knit six blouses while remaining completely silent. The sister is accused of being a witch, but she keeps working on the blouses without saying a word. She only breaks her silence after she is done and the brothers are turned back into human form. Another example is the story of Penelope in *The Odyssey*. With her husband Odysseus absent for ten years, she prevents suitors from marrying her by using this feminine tool of resistance. She tricks the suitors by claiming that she will choose one of them whenever she is done weaving a burial shroud for her husband’s father. Until her husband returns, she keeps weaving the shroud during the day and unraveling parts of it during the night so that it appears unfinished. Weaving as a protest tool finds its way in modern political activism especially among Western women as well. Needle art, while often considered part of feminine subjection, is reappropriated by women to become a political tool, such as the development of sewing circles during the Abolitionist movement in the United States which



served as a tool for agitation and keeping alive the question of anti-slavery (Segal). More recently, and despite the dispute among feminists about its significance, the knitted pink “pussy hat” became one of the most prominent white women’s symbols of the anti-Trump women’s march in 2016.

Baraka’s sewing habits can be seen as utilizing a similar reappropriation pattern in the narrative. She reminds us of these aforementioned Penelopes who spend the time of injustice knitting or sewing until the moment of merit. On the surface, Baraka seems to be practicing a mundane passive feminine act of weaving, while in fact, she is the one who agitates the young Fedda into breaking the circle of ethnic cleansing. All these years, and with every Eid day, Baraka has a single consistent dream: to break Sabti’s neck and humiliate him (105). On the day that Fedda manipulates her husband into having intercourse with her, the three women – Fedda, Baraka, and the narrator – dance in joy and celebration. Fedda’s forced consummation after six months of her marriage and her subsequent pregnancy has three significations: a victory against the authoritative patriarchy as represented by Abdul Rahim; a political act of resistance to avenge her raped grandmother, and an insurance of the continuity of their offspring. Although the reader knows that Fedda and her child die during childbirth, her corpse’s disappearance becomes a cause of anxiety for Abdul Rahim, who thought that his plan of saving the purity of his lineage has succeeded, only to discover that she has vanished. He exclaims: “What for God’s sake are they? Did the jinn give birth to them then took them back?” (al-Ghamdi 146). Fedda’s ghost chases him for the rest of his life.

Similar to *al-Bahriyyat*, the novel *Wajhat al-Bawsala* indicates that “any system of differentiation shapes those on whom it bestows privilege as well as those it oppresses” (Frankenberg 1). Fedda and the narrator, for instance, both belong to the same family, but the

color of their skin is the factor that determine their class and their choices in life. While the narrator is able to impose her conditions and refuse, at the end, to live with Humood by insisting that she be given a separate section in the house and be exempt from her marital duties, Fedda did not have other choice but the violent one. She had to result to a subversive act that included forceful marital sex, death, and finally the disappearance of her body.

### 3.3 *Zarayib al-Abeed*: Slaves by Default

Another contemporary novel that focuses on the link between Blackness and slavery and deals with the impact of individuals' skin color on their lives is Najwa Bin Shatwan's *Zarayib al-'Abeed (The Slave Pens*- Daar al-Saaqi, 2016). Published in Arabic and shortlisted for the Arabic Booker prize, *Zarayib al-'Abeed* takes place in the slums of enslaved in Benghazi, Libya, sometime before the end of the Ottoman empire (1924) and the beginning of the Italian colonizers' invasion (1911). The novel tells the narrative of slavery and class struggle through a love story between the white slave owner Muhammad Bin Shatwan, son of a noble family, and his Black *jariya* (enslaved woman) Ta'weeda. The affair provokes anger among Muhammad's family who refuses this relationship and try to keep the two lovers away from each other, especially because Muhammad is married to his cousin, also a daughter of a well-to-do family, who bore him three daughters. When Ta'weeda becomes pregnant, Muhammad's mother tricks her into having a miscarriage through a painful procedure, then marries her off to one of the family's enslaved men, Salim. Muhammad makes a deal with Salim to keep Ta'weeda as Salim's wife but he forbids Salim from having an intimate relationship with her. Ta'weeda gives birth to a boy and the family believes it is Salim's. In one of Muhammad's trade trips weeks after the boy was born, the family hosts a huge business-related event. Ta'weeda, still dealing with postpartum and adjusting to a life of motherhood, forgets to do some chores. The master, Bin

Shatwan, Muhammad's father, decides to punish her by hanging her from the bathroom ceiling and leaving her infant under her in a cradle. No one can break the master's decision out of fear.

The baby dies of dehydration and only at that moment Bin Shatwan learns that the baby is his grandson; the only boy born to Muhammad, the one for whom that everyone is waiting.

Knowing that this will trigger Muhammad's fury, the family tries to cover up the incident; they sell Ta'weeda and claim that she escaped. Ta'weeda is sent to a brothel and forced to become a prostitute. Muhammad's relationship with his family is ruined after he learns about the painful death of his only son that he was planning to acknowledge after the trip. Ta'weeda escapes from the brothel and moves to the slum, changing her name and identity. Muhammad finds Ta'weeda after desperate efforts, but their relationship has changed to a love-hate relationship due to the lack of trust as they keep hearing fake stories about each other from those who seek to separate them. At this stage, Ta'weeda gains her freedom as Italy bans slavery in Libya after the invasion; the banning of slavery is part of the European colonial discourse of colonialism as salvation.

Ta'weeda and Muhammad have a daughter 'Atiqa (which in Arabic means the "enslaved woman who gained her freedom"). 'Atiqa grows up not knowing that Ta'weeda is her mother. Ta'weeda tells everyone that she is 'Atiqa's aunt to protect her from Bin Shatwan's reaction if they were to find out that she is Muhammad's daughter from his former *jariya*. Muhammad dies before he declares his parentage of 'Atiqa. Ta'weeda dies painfully during a fire set by the government to purge the slum when the plague spreads. She aims to protect 'Atiqa's birth certificate, which is the only document to ensure her daughter's rights in her father's name and inheritance. Only then, 'Atiqa knows that Ta'weeda is her mother. After a tragic trauma, 'Atiqa is rescued and sent to a missionary school. She works as a nurse and marries her old friend Yousef who is also a formerly enslaved man. Her cousin Ali, her father's best friend, tries to reach her to tell her the

story of her parents and to assure her that he is fighting with his mother's family to grant her the inheritance of her father. The narrative begins when Ali's visit to 'Atiqa and it continues, then, with Atiqa's life and her childhood in the slum, where she is told that Ta'weeda is her aunt and that her name is Sabriyah. At this stage, the narrative delves into intensive details of the poverty and misery of the Black community lives in the slum.

The discourse on Blackness in *Zarayib al-'Abeed* is packed with identity politics and complexities. As discussed in the last section, dominant streak in Arabic discourse strongly associates Blackness with savageness, excessive sensuality, animalism, ugliness, and degeneration. Through voices of its characters and the tension between them, the narrative shows how, despite Quranic calls for equality among skin colors and ethnicities, racism is deeply rooted in this culture. The narrative shows how this racism can create unjust situations that may last for generations, because the social constructions of Blackness are reproduced in each generation. The world in the narrative is physically and metaphorically divided into upper/white and lower/Black sides, and all things are witnessed through the lens of these two colors. As for the physical/spatial level, Black people, freed or escapees, live in a separate closed and neglected spatial area – the “pens” – where they endure poverty, diseases, illiteracy, and lack of resources. On the metaphorical level, Blackness in the novel is associated with slavery and inferiority; any Black character is assumed to be a slave whether he/she is or not. Words such as Black/ slave/ servant are often interchangeable in day-to-day conversations between characters. Color is a metaphorical barrier that sets the two groups apart and prevents them from mixing or understanding each other because they do not live same experiences: “It is whiteness that stands between us and them and not Blackness... Their non-Black skin is unable to approach us and abolish the distance [my own translation]” (48). The novel uses the Arabic term “*al-bayadh*”

which stands for whiteness, and not any other word that refers to light-skin tones. This is a common rhetorical discourse within Arab communities, revealing a misconception and simplification towards the concept of race and ethnicity. The sensitivity of the author regarding racism manifests here in the way she uses the feature of dialogism in Bakhtinian sense. Racist language and slurs are depicted as some characters' habits and mentality. She allows characters to speak their own reality and not her own opinions. (More Examples to be provided)

One of the novel's climaxes on Blackness is the sealing or the lock (*tasfih/ taqfeel*) scene. *Tasfih* is a magico-religious technique inflicted on girls in some North African countries, like Tunisia, by women in rural villages who consider themselves the guardians of tradition (Hejaiej 137). It is meant to be a protection for girls against any act of sexual intercourse – whether desired or forced. An elderly woman performs the ritual by cutting a girl's left thigh seven minor cuts, and dunking a raisin or a date into the blood while the girl recites the talisman: "I am a wall and the son of another is a thread" to indicate the impossibility of sexual penetration (Alfarshishi). The sealing/lock should be reversed on the wedding night before the marriage is consummated. In the novel, the sealing ritual, however, is confined only to free girls of non-slavery descent. Servants and enslaved girls are prohibited from doing it since sexuality of enslaved women should be available to their masters whenever they please. The narrative depicts a scene of this tradition when 'Atiqa is brought by her mother – still alleged to be her aunt – to the old woman practitioner who seals girls in order to lock her. This event is employed to further deepen the issue of color and its impact on 'Atiqa's life. The first sign of social hierarchy and ethnic segregation in this event occurs when 'Atiqa notices that some women who arrived after them entered before, while she and Sabriyya (i.e. Ta'weeda) had to wait in extremely hot weather. When she complains about that, Sabriyya says, "They are free women. They are not

like us, or we are not like them” (47). It is ‘Atiqa’s childhood lesson that her Black skin color is associated to slavery although she is a free-born girl.

The second gesture in this event is the assumption that any Black person is an enslaved person by default. The practitioner, the *lella* (a North African word for aunt), immediately refuses to seal ‘Atiqa after looking at her. She believes that ‘Atiqa is a servant because she is Black. The *Lella* angrily asks Sabriyya, “who told you servants can be locked?” ‘Atiqa, a slave by default, recalls, “The old woman refused to seal me because I am a slave, a servant; Black and not free” (59). The antonym word for Black is white, yet ‘Atiqa uses “free,” the antonym of slave, as a linguistic gesture that “Black” and “slave” mean one thing and can be replaced by each other in such dominantly racist atmosphere. The woman accuses Ta’weeda of lying and asks her to show the document that proves the girl is a daughter of the master Bin Shatwan. The *Lella* asserts, “Masters will punish me if they learn I seal slaves” (63). This reaction and accusation deeply hurts Sabriyya who escapes, risks her life and hides her identity so she can provide her daughter with a decent life and see her being treated like a free girl. But now that she realizes she is unable to break the social frame, she heavily encounters the price that her daughter will have to pay. She falls and cries that even young ‘Atiqa was taken by that reaction, “Her tears, that I saw racing down on her black face, terrified me. I realized for the first time that she had been Black since she came into existence and was never anything but Black” (60). This realization is not about the actual black color as much as the recognition of its consequences and meaning on the social scale. The scene is intensified with connotations, repetitions, emotions, stories on slavery, stories on young women’s experiences with honor and virginity, fear, hope, crying, and also a little victory as Sabriyya is able to lock her daughter at the end with some help from the Black servant of the *lella*.

The reader can also notice a sense of internalized racism in this scene. As ‘Atiqa absorbs the hypothetical reality of her Blackness inferiority, her thoughts revert to herself reflecting on how she conceives Black and white people. She understands at that moment how she used to labelize people according to their skin-color. She understands ethics, social hierarchy and politics only through these two colors black and white,

My mind only knew that free people are those who have a white skin; people who are not like us in everything, they do not resemble us even as they resemble us. I do not bear any grudge against their distinctive color, food, clothes, houses, livelihood, and all the fortunes of life. Actually, my admiration for the cleanliness of their clothes and their houses and for the charity that they give us impresses me and makes me comply with them and fondly follow their lifestyle. I do not know why they are the masters and we are the servants. (48)

The passage shows how ‘Atiqa subconsciously accepts the dominant rhetoric and biases against her own ethnicity and believes that whiteness and Blackness both have values, weight, and effects. In the next few lines, she recalls how people in that white dominantly area, including those with dark-skin color, look down at them because of their Blackness, “In Benghazi, I was chased by my Blackness that is renounced by non-Black people. Even those who are closer to black than white in skin tone believe they have the right to reject our Blackness that’s odd in the Mediterranean White Sea” (59). Such gestures recur throughout the narrative and affect individuals’ judgments of themselves and their own community. When Muhammad, the master, for instance, approaches Ta’weeda to have an intimate relationship, she seems surprised and not able to believe that this master wants to have her for himself because she is convinced that she is “an ugly Black slave” that no man can desire, let alone the master himself (179).

### 3.4 *Thaman al-Mulh*: What after Manumission?

*Thaman al-Mulh (Price of the Salt-* Jadawil, 2016) by the Bahraini writer Khalid al-Bassam also taps into these notions of racism and internalized racism as a form of systematic

oppression. The novel is a coming-of-age story centering on the life of the enslaved Black girl Hanna/Abda during the first few decades of the twentieth century primarily in Bahrain and partially in Ethiopia and other eastern African countries. Hanna's destitute parents sell her in a slave market out of poverty. She moves with her buyer, a rich merchant Muhammad bin Nasri, to Bahrain where she undergoes the experiences of slavery, torture, falling in love, and being resold to another owner, before she finally obtains her freedom via the British mandate government in Bahrain. Again, banning slavery was part of the salvation narrative of colonial powers, although it was hypocritical given their practice of other forms of racial inequality. Right after purchasing her, the master changes her name to "Abda," which literally means a female slave in Arabic. At first she refuses this name and is punished because she demands that Bin Nasri change it, but by the end of the story, she decides to keep it in the deed of manumission even though she has the choice to change it. She believes that it becomes part of her history and identity (202- 209). This acceptance, once more, evokes Althusser notion of interpellation and show how individuals use it to cope with their realities.

The novel aims to highlight the suffering of oppressed enslaved communities and demonstrates the injustice to which they are subjected as well as to illustrate the impact of ethnicity, gender, and class on the lives of these individuals. Further, the novel tackles the historical role played by European colonization in abolishing and managing the affairs of slavery especially in areas where this trade had flourished since the pre-Islamic era of the Roman and Sassanid empires and even earlier such as the coast of Oman and the Arabic/Persian gulf. Scholars of the region's history such as John Bulloch remark that one of the traditions set by the British government following the abolishing of slavery is the tradition of emancipation if requested on any British soil. That is, any enslaved man or woman would gain their freedom as



soon as they enter a British embassy or consulate and touch the flagpole (192). *Thaman al-Mulh* however, tackles the contradictory role of the British government on this matter. The narrative demonstrates how the mandate British government in Bahrain, for instance, ostensibly prohibited slavery and human trafficking either by making agreements with the princes of those regions or by chasing slave traders and ships loaded with enslaved people and liberating them immediately. On the other hand, the colonizers complicated deals with these princes and merchants to facilitate the slave trade and maintain their interests (al-Bassam 90).

The narrative addresses, as well, the domestic and public persecution against both free and Black men and women. It does so through several techniques and examples. Some of which represent lives of servants in private spheres, such as the stories of Abda and other domestic workers in Bin Nasri's and Moza's houses. Other examples represent public spheres such as the scene of the port and the arrival of captured enslaved men loaded in ships, as well as the scenes in the slave market, with the humiliating process of buying and the physical examination of slaves who are commodified and treated as goods. The novel also utilizes historical documents and events related to trading or policies of slavery. Finally, it employs the technique of letters – sent by enslaved people to the British embassy to deliver their grievances – that include a tremendous number of agonizing stories. The novel tackles the dominant rhetoric about Blackness and its linkage to slavery in the era it depicts. It evokes some presuppositions used to facilitate human enslavement and to justify the exploitation of Black people in particular into slavery as well as discouraging enslaved people from insurgency. Characters in the novel repeatedly use statements denoting that enslaved people are sentenced to this subjectivity by birth. “Act of God,” “God's will,” “fate and destiny,” and the exorbitant price of freedom are examples of the rhetoric used to prevent Black people from seeking any change or rebellion

against the status quo. When Abda asks her second owner Moza – who, unlike Bin Nasri, treats Abda and the other servants kindly – about the possibility to acquire her freedom, Moza wrathfully answers: “Have you gone mad? Don’t you know that you are a Black slave and it’s been written by God that you will be a slave all your life? [my own translation]” (al-Bassam 186). The novel exposes that such discourse is used here as a persuasion tool by masters to maintain the status quo. Nevertheless, enslaved people also use these tools as a mean of coping with their situation and protecting their lives. Mustafa Hijazi deems this attitude as one of the self defence mechanisms whereby oppressed groups adopt beliefs of despair and attribute them to the higher power (105). When newly enslaved Abda attempts to rebel against the name she is given by her master, the old enslaved woman Umm al-Khair advises Abda, “I hope you know that the life written to us since our birth is the life of slavery, and all slavery is cruel and brutal, but the reason for it is that we were born with a Black skin. This is our guilt and shame” (al-Bassam 49). Abda submits to this advice and realizes after the severe punishments she receives that “Patience of slaves is better than their courage” (al-Bassam 49).

Like the previous novels of this chapter, *Thaman al-Mulh* tackles notions of social stratifications and social reproduction. It shows how children of rich people become rich, such as Muhammad, the son of Ibn Nasri who becomes a merchant like his father, whereas Abda and Umm al-Khair remain tied to the chain of slavery like their parents. Inequality is reproduced over generations and form individuals’ options according to the degree of their access to means of production. What seems to be a cruel slavery for some might be seen as liberation for others. In situations of poverty and lack of sources of livelihood, slavery becomes the only escape from these extreme situations. Several characters in the novel, such as Abda and Umm al-Khair, are sold by their own parents to save them from privation. The parents convince their children that

slavery, although abominable, is a better fate than starvation. They believe that many affluent families treat their servants as their children. Historically, to give an example, Bulloch notes that some masters in the Gulf region treat their slaves like their own children, to the point of encouraging them to obtain their freedom (193). The novel tackles this issue through the relationship of Abda and the first owner's wife – Aisha. (more examples from the novel).

Slavery and racism, as depicted in *Thaman al-Mulh* are systematic and rooted in the structure of the society. In such environments where the narrative takes place, even the allowed emancipation may not always be the right medium to overcome the socio-economic injustice. As long as the structures do not change, alternatives of slavery are limited and even more difficult for these people because neither the society will accept them nor will they be able to become part of the hegemonic circle to use the Gramscian notion. In the beginning of the story, when the narrative is set in the headquarters of the British government in Manama, the narrator tells us that a group of enslaved persons freed by the British refuse freedom and demand to be sold or returned to their masters. No further explanation is given about their choice of slavery over freedom. Their attitude shocks the British governor so that he requests “all Arab interpreters” to make sure he is not misunderstanding the situation. The Black enslaved individuals and the British governor belong to two different realities and therefore cannot communicate or understand each other. They need a linguistic intermediary. But the event indicates that the problem between privileged and underprivileged communities is not just a linguistic one. Rather, it is a structural gap determined by individuals' place on the social scale. Evidently, the interpreter is unable to bridge the distance between the two worlds. The event is interrupted by a compromise between the broker and the governor and yet the voice of the enslaved people is not

heard. Neither is the voice of the interpreter heard because there no logic to be explained, according to the governor (13).

Abda manages to obtain her freedom after struggling with her master and her circumstances. She learns about the convention of emancipation made by the mandate British government. Thus, she does everything possible to obtain that right. But it was very quick for her to realize how limited her options are. Her lover Barakat, who helps her to go through the official process of emancipation tells her it is impossible for them to marry because his family will never accept him marrying down to a Black slave. She objects that she is not a slave anymore, stating, “only my body is Black but I’m free, not a slave” (213). This statement, nevertheless, implicates that emancipation does not mean a breakage from the social hierarchy scribed on her body due to her color. Even if she manages to change some rules, obtaining the deed of manumission and owning some money she saves from dancing in private parties, her color and the stigma associated to it is not erasable. Because she is Black, people assume she is an enslaved woman and they treat her with disrespect. She is unable to rent a room or find a job. Men and women in the city market ridicule her and refuse to acknowledge her freedom, “Some of them told me: we do not rent off [rooms] to slaves. Others said, homes are only for the masters. Housing is not to be rented to women. And few said: bring your master so we can negotiate with him” (al-Bassam 211). She comes to learn that certificates mean nothing if there are no regulations or rules to guarantee the rights of freed people, “These dogs do not acknowledge any conventions, treaties, or any papers no matter how significant... They only want the Blacks to be their servants, and to remain slaves under their feet so they can beat them like animals and violate their bodies without mercy” (214).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, and although the novel is written with an intention of denouncing slavery and pointing out the manifestations of enslaved community's persecution, the novel fails to rid itself of racism. This may be due to the traditional narrative technique used by the author, which does not help much to provide the advantage of pluralism or separation between the voice of the writer, the voice of the narrator, and the voices of the characters. Thus, the novel comes loaded with signs and references of subtle racism that seem spontaneous and unconscious. When the omniscient narrator depicts the humiliating situation in the port where enslaved groups are prepared to be "unloaded" from ships and sold in the slave market, he signalizes, "the rancid smell of the slaves was the smell of the stinking port that was suffocating the atmosphere" (22). The word "rancid" is used in this context in a normalized manner as if it is associated with Black ethnicity by nature and not due to the inhumane situations they endure in these ships. Another example is when Barakat, the handsome man who becomes Abda's lover, flirts with her for the first time. It surprises Abda and makes her wonder why any handsome man might be interested in her (138). After her first sexual experience with him, she describes her joy and the sweet feeling of being pretty and desired. However, the way she articulates these feelings implicates that it is unusual for a Black young woman to be pretty and wanted "I felt that [my body] is beautiful despite its Blackness, and all men want it despite its dimness, and that I was beautiful despite my bondage" (181). Another extreme example of this ambivalent depiction of internalized racism in *Thaman al-Mulh* is when Abda first encounters the whiteness of her mistress Aisha's body while helping her in the bath. She seems astonished by Aisha's beauty that fits white standards. She compares her mistress' white body with her own, wondering why God gave this lady this beautiful white body and soft straight hair while she gets this black, dusky body and ugly, kinky hair (52) (direct quote needed). Internalized racism and Blackophobia

escalates when Abda later has a dream that she is peeling her own skin using a knife, and underneath that black skin, a white skin appears, “I have come to believe that the Blackness of our bodies is just a layer above the skin because of dirtiness and not bathing for a long time, and that if we remove this layer we will become white like the rest of human beings” (al-Bassam 53). Similar to ‘Atiqa’s judgment towards white people in *Zarayeb al-Abeed*, Abda is taken by the white world too. She feels inferior in front of whites because they are free and have agency over their own bodies and lives. When comparing this depiction of Blackness and internalized racism in *Thaman al-Mulh* with the discourse of *Zarayib al-Abeed*, we notice that *Zarayib al-Abeed* uses derogatory language and racist phrases in a manner that allows the characters to respond and express their grievances about such racism. Unlike the rhetoric in *Thaman al-Mulh*, there is no sense of support or approval to such stereotypes, but instead, the reader can identify indirect condemnation. Both novels reveal, however, that as much as “racism is systematic, internalized racism is systematic too” (Bivens).

Slavery and Blackness in all four texts are attached to each other as if the default identity given to Black people in literature is being enslaved. We may find a white character who is from a slavery origin, but it is difficult to find a Black character who is not enslaved or associated to slavery. Even if a Black character is legally free, he/she is still be looked at in the narrative as if they belong to slavery by the virtue of their color. The analysis reveals, however, that even with these texts that aim to condemn slavery, racism remains a subtle tone that might appear at any unconscious moment. Blackness functions as the hidden force of oppression that governs these character’s lives regardless of their class and position. Whether Black women are free family members such as the case of Baraka and Fedda in *Wojhat a-Bawsala* and ‘Atiqa in *Zarayib al-Abeed*, or emancipated such as Abda in *Taman al-Mulh*, the entire socio-economic structure

works in parallel with the hegemonic powers to disenfranchise such groups and isolate them based on their color, and the novels reflect these situations.

## Chapter III

### Domestic Workers' Sexuality in Contemporary Arabic Literature

#### 1. Pure Versus Dirty Women

The sexuality of domestic workers in contemporary Arabic literature often emerges as a vortex of troubles and conflicts. Households and familial spheres, where these characters appear, are sexually charged domains; they are the spatial frames where most of the intimate human contact occurs. Within these spheres, the problem of domestics recurs as they are part of this familial life, yet they are outsiders to it. Domestic workers do not belong in kinship relations to the families for whom they work, rather, they belong because of the virtue of their labor. Such a situation qualifies domestic workers to more likely become the members who transgress classes hierarchy and established stratifications. In her study "Sexuality and the Servant: An Exploration of Arab Images of the Sexuality of Domestic Maids Living in the Household," Ray Jureidini indicates that female servants are typically a source of jealousy and troubles for couples and families due to their inevitable sexual availability. On the one hand, their sexuality disturbs the steadiness of private/public spaces, which in heteronormative discourse are deemed as two separate spheres. However, "by virtue of their outsider status, the presence of live-in domestic workers creates a public space (the maid's workplace) located in the private sphere of the home" (10) leading to chaos and awkwardness. Further, most of the tasks performed by domestics fall within the intimate range of house chores, such as cooking, bedding, bathing, and child and elder care. Beside tasks of cleaning and sweeping floors, domestic workers are expected to provide emotional and physical care to their employers too. Chances of their intimate interaction with family members are usually high. Plus, the majority of these domestics are young, outsiders, and single, and so they are the usual victim and the most available target of sexual relief for their



male – and female – employers (Jureidini 2). On the other hand, sex is perceived in this body of literature as an agency and a resource of empowerment for these women. Their relationship with upper-class employers is their Trojan horse to class mobility. Cross-class relationships for domestic workers seem to be the fastest way to break the chain of social reproduction. However, in these novels, domestic workers' chances of succeeding in upgrading their class through such relationships are rare due to the rigid systematic class structure and the harsh rejection they encounter by other family members. Comparing this fictional treatment to Arabic cinematic works, we can see cinema's distinctive treatment in dealing with this matter. Cinema and popular culture seem to be closer to the utopian vision in similar situations, allowing some working-class young women to move between social strata through sexual relations. In two popular films *Alkhadima (The Maid, 1984)*, starring Nadia al-Jundi as Ferdus, and *Afwah wa Aranib (Mouths and Rabbits 1977)*, starring Faten Hamama as Na'ima, domestic workers succeed in marrying their employers, breaking the class barriers, and entering the hegemonic circle. However, an examination of domestic workers in Arabic film is beyond the scope of this study. In contemporary Arabic novels, the utopian vision declines. The literary texts are not optimistic regarding breaking the delusional, yet solid, boundaries between social strata.

In her study on the sexuality of domestic workers in the eighteenth-century English literature, Kristina Straub recaps the problem of domestic workers' sexuality in this literature as, "Servants are not supposed to have sex; servants are always having sex" (34). Straub discusses how servants' sexuality "fits awkwardly, if at all, into popular literary narratives of family and domestic life" (34). By this she means that in most of the cases, domestics are supposed to be chaste according to the ethical principles of their employers. However, they are typically deemed as morally weak and helpless. Due to their inevitable sexual availability, this group is the easiest

sexual target for other adults in familial spheres. Moreover, domestics are mostly young females in their sexually active stage, but unlike other adults in these households, there are no legitimate venues for their sexual needs. Their options are limited because marriage, the only legitimate channel for sex, generally means they are no longer servants. The preferred age for domestic workers to be hired is the same age when they are expected to marry and reproduce. If they wait until they finish their service in domestic work, they are most likely old and might miss their chance to find a partner (Strub 34-35). Chastity, on the other hand, does not seem like an option because servants are expected to be vulnerable and available for their employers' needs, including sexual ones. Female domestics are seen as inherently passive victims to their sexuality. According to Strub, the choice to become a sex worker, for a female domestic worker, is a far easier option than struggling to protect her chastity. She concludes, "For now, suffice to say that... if the female servant were not viewed as an innocent victim, she was seen as a guilty whore" (38).

Similar remarks can be made on Arabic literature regarding the sexuality of domestic workers and its inevitable availability for their employers. However, it is important to note that Straub's analysis is contextualized within the Western historical narrative. In order to better understand cultural references in the literary texts of this chapter, one needs to pay attention to the webs of domestic relations and dynamics within their context. It may help for this contextualizing to briefly review some juristic conceptions regarding the sexuality of enslaved women and the system of marriage in Islam as this system is complex and influenced by many factors in addition to Islamic ethics. It is important to clarify, as well, that "Islamic law" is not a unified body of regulations. Rather, it constitutes of variety of schools of thought that took shape over several centuries and involved distinctive sects and doctrines with variation of

interpretations and applications of Islamic texts (Ahmed 59). After the death of the prophet Muhammad who was the living interpreter of the Quran, the responsibility of translating the Quranic ideals into practical regulations transferred to Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs and commentators who succeeded the prophet as Leila Ahmed explains (59). Moreover, Islam, as Kecia Ali points out, did not exist in a vacuum, and neither did its lawful system (8). Practices of pre-Islamic Arab societies, as well as local customs of communities encountered by Muslims during Islamic conquests had heavily influenced the development of Islamic law. Umayyad and Abbasid societies, on the one hand, had inherited a complex and highly hierarchical Byzantine Christian system of slavery. On the other hand, these societies, especially the Abbasid, became flooded with enslaved people through its own expansion of the slave trade and other slavery sources. All these elements contribute to shaping the Islamic law regarding marriage and concubine system that was consolidated to support the interests of the elites of these societies (Gordon 5).

Enslaved women in the Umayyad and Abbasid era derived from at least four sources: reproduction by slaves in Muslim households, captives of war and other acts of violence, acquisition from busy slave markets, and as an exchange of persons in political settlements (Gordon 4). These sources varied depending on spatial and temporal contexts. For example, slaves acquired through capture in war was more likely prevalent during the early Islamic period, whereas slave markets flourished during the first Abbasid period (Gordon 4). Several hierarchies and classifications also existed among these groups of enslaved females including *jawari*, *qiyan* and concubines.

The classification of female slavery in the mediaeval Islamic periods is often overlooked with almost all the attention directed towards the “singing slave girls,” due to their impact on the

literary culture. What distinguished the singing slave women from the concubines was precisely the performance aspect of their intimate labor which not only garnered them more attention but also raised their market value in relation to their counterparts (Reynolds 100). The performative aspect of their labor, much like the geishas of Japan, related to the status quo and symbol of elitism of their owners who enjoyed the various artistic skills of the *qiyan*. The arrival of the tradition of owning *qiyan* came to al-Andalus via the early Arab/Islamic conquest and brought with them the much-debated practices of training young girls the skills to serve and entertain their owners in almost an organized and institutional manner (Reynolds 101).

The cataloguing of young slave women in a social order, besides based on race and color, also depended on the voice. While earlier only darker-skinned women were chosen for performative training, the eventual rise in demands for *qiyan* also evaluated their voices before classifying them as *qiyan*. Overtime, the women mastered the skill of improvization and poetry, often amalgamating both to playfully roast and poetically tease their male audiences. The training and tradition of *qiyan*, although exported from the East, came to be highly specialized in the tenth and twelve century al-Andulus where the *qiyans* sought specialized scholarly and artistic training and even saw an upward social mobility (Reynolds 103-104).

The growing population of *jawai* and *qiyan* created several legal debates about their legal status. The culture of commodification and performance surrounding them left its impact on interpretations of Quran and Islamic ethics. One example of these issues related to women dress system and veiling in Islam regarding free and enslaved women. It can be understood from many debates on the subject, as interpreted by later commentators with complex social hierarchies which compiled the early Islamic material from oral archives, that veiling was not considered applicable for enslaved women. It was understood in the ninth –and tenth – century Muslim

societies that consolidated these materials into laws that one reason for establishing women's modest dress in early Islam was to differentiate between free and enslaved women although the Quran does not say this. Quran 33:59 says, "O Prophet, tell thy wives and daughters, as well as all [other] believing women, that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments [when in public]: this will be more conducive to their being recognized [as decent women] and not annoyed" (Asad translation, via alim.org). The well-known Quranic exegete Al-Qurtubi (1214-1273), says, regarding Quran 33:59, that prior to the revelation of this verse, free Muslim women in Medina were harassed by some dissolute groups in public and the harassers claimed they mistook these women for enslaved women. Since then, he says, free Muslim women were ordered to wear the veil so they would not be mistaken for enslaved women (Al-Qurtubi). This implies that enslaved women's bodies do not have the same level of protection as free women's bodies.

Another issue related to enslaved women in Islamic law is marriage and sexuality. An enslaved female does not have the choice to prevent her master from having sex with her because she is his possession. Knowing that a wife, also, is not permitted to prevent her husband from having sex with her, some scholars such as Kecia Ali further complicate the matter of women in Islamic laws and investigate the extent to which wives and enslaved women might overlap or differentiate. In a comparison between slavery and marriage system in Islamic law, Ali illustrates that "the contracting of marriage was paralleled to the purchase of a slave, and divorce parallel to freeing a slave. Marriage and slavery intersected at the institution of concubinage (*milk al-yamin*), which legitimized sex between a man and his own female slave and made any resultant progeny free and legitimate" (Ali 8). The same web of Islamic law, nevertheless provides enslaved women with several rights such as the right not to be sold should she have a child with

the master, and the legitimacy, acknowledged paternity, and right to inherit of their children, (Cuno 92). Although slavery has been officially abolished in Arab countries, and despite the break with the prevailing provisions regarding slavery, it is still possible to find inquiries on Islamic web pages that asks *mufties* –clerics trained in Islamic law – whether it is permissible to have sex with a maid because the questioner is making the alarmingly mistaken assumption that modern domestic workers can somehow belong to the same category of enslaved woman (“hal yajooz”).

Another significant aspect to examine intimate domestic relations is the notions of purity and contamination. In her book *Domesticity and Dirt*, Phyllis Palmer further complicates the concept of “bad” dirt and “good” cleanliness within domestic spheres and relations between middle-class employers and their servants. She builds on the theory of Mary Douglas in her influential work *Purity and Danger* which explores different cultural notions of pollution and taboo by arguing that homes in Western consciousness are embodied as the setting for ‘good’ women who are virtuous and clean; mothers, wives, and daughters. However, the chores they perform at home are associated with dirt, which is a threat to the purity of these women - the same way forbidden sex is. The function of domestic workers is to perform the dirty chores in the household and to take that duty away from those “clean” employers. Naturally, this also translates into sexuality: “dirt and sex live in close association, and women who clean up things associated with bodies find themselves mysteriously deemed sexual and powerful regardless of their actual social status” (Palmer 138). In order to maintain their status as “good” women, Jureidini agrees with Palmer that middle-class housewives seek to preserve their sexually pure image by transferring the “dirty” aspects of womanhood to the domestic worker who is employed to do those unpleasant chores, including sexual ones (Jureidini 5-6).

Such concepts are also ingrained in the mindset of middle-class Arab Muslim domesticity. El Saadawi attacks the normalization of the sexual abuse that poor female domestic workers are usually exposed to by their employers and partially attributes it to the ‘upbringing’ of middle-class women in mid-century Egypt (El Saadawi 84). She claims that a large proportion of middle-class wives in Egypt suffer from frigidity because they are taught since childhood that sex is forbidden and filthy and therefore should be hated and criminalized. They mostly grow up knowing very less about sex life, which results in an alienation from sex and intimacy, she says. Further, norms of patriarchal societies foster high-handed and authoritarian social relations and give men superiority over women which, she argues, is more likely result in cold marital relationships and lack of affection. El Saadawi indicates: “Most wives are frigid because of their upbringing and the sexual and physical suppression to which they are exposed since childhood, or because of the lack of real love and affection or at least understanding... Most marriages are contracted for economic reasons, which in itself is sufficient to explain why there is rarely any genuine feeling between the couple” (El Saadawi 84). It can be understood from El Saadawi’s words that a respectful middle-class woman of mid-century Egypt is expected to avoid vulgar sex and keep marital sex within the limits of modesty. Vulgar and dirty sex is for lower-class women - servants and sex-workers - and not for respectful women in the social system El Saadawi outlines.

Several texts of contemporary Arabic literature speak to these notions. There is always a high sexual desire and energy surrounding fictional female domestics as if they evoke sexual appeal by the virtue of their existence. Whether in a slavery model or more recent forms of domesticity, a female domestic worker is perceived, to use Strub’s words, as a “walking sexual target” (36). Domestic workers are perceived in this literature as tools for sexual relief. The

innocent/ whore dichotomy is still a dominant stereotype of this category of women in contemporary Arabic literature. We see the prototype of the domestic worker who is a passive victim of sexual abuse versus the one of the oversexed seductive female domestic worker. If the character is personating an older domestic worker, however, she is most likely perceived as an asexual being who perform the motherly role of a kind and satisfied servant. Beside these inscribed images, more vibrant characters and manifestations of intimacy involving domestic workers begin to appear in contemporary literature. Fictional domesticity is still represented as a realm of oppression and exploitation, but also there is the side of caring, loving and intimate interaction. A Novel such as *Zarayib al-Abeed*, for instance, provides a fictional scenario where love, and not only sexual abuse, can exist between an enslaved women and her master. Interracial and cross-class relationships have also become a fertile field for modern Arabic fictional writing as previously discussed in *Wojhat al-Bawsala* and will be further explained in this chapter, too.

The focus in this section will be on the stereotypical representations regarding domestic workers' sexuality. I will examine the most three common archetypes of domestic workers as sexual beings: the hypersexualized, the victim, and the asexualized domestic workers. Fatiha Murshid's *Almulhimaat (The Inspirational)* and Ali Badr's *Papa Sartre* are the main texts for this section.

## 2. The Whore, the Innocent, and the Dada

In many contemporary fictional texts, the images and functions of domestic workers have developed into more mature characters that function as cardinal units of the narrative. The marginal social space no longer means marginal fictional space for these groups. They begin to be protagonists with unique stories and characters rather than the flat and ahistorical characters in



earlier literary texts. However, some images of domestic workers, such as the erotic, hypersexualized being, the innocent victim, and the asexual, old, motherly figure are among the most common images in this body of literature.

An extreme example of the hypersexualized, seductive domestic worker is Rujina in Ali Badr's *Papa Sartre* (The American University in Cairo Press- 2009). First published in Arabic in 2009, *Papa Sartre* is a sarcastically-toned satirical novel that unfolds in modern Iraq and focuses on the story of Abd al-Rahman, an Iraqi flâneur from an aristocratic family who is fond of Sartre and existentialism. Abd al-Rahman travels to Paris to pursue his philosophy degree but fails to attain it due to his laziness and lack of intelligence. He returns to his town in Iraq with his French wife Germaine, who used to work in Paris as a domestic worker, but he passes her off to be Sartre's cousin. After his return, he spends his time between bars and prostitutes, accompanied by a group of scroungers. Abd al-Rahman claims his own version of existentialism and nausea that is based on apathetic lifestyle, entertainment, and carnal pleasures. People surrounding him pretend to be loyal followers as long as he throws cash on them. *Papa Sartre* is a scathing ironic criticism of Arab intellectuals of the 1960s and beyond who claimed to introduce Western philosophy to the Arab world while being idly rich, exploitative, self-serving opportunists (who were also immersed in alcoholism and sensual pleasures).

Rujina is the domestic worker who arrives at Abd al-Rahman's family's house after a scandal in her own family. She runs away with her father's wine-trading rival and married him against her father's will; upon learning this, her father dies. Her husband quickly abandons her after the marriage and is soon killed by her cousin, who is defending the family's honor. The cousin also attempts to rape Rujina, so she kills him and escapes with the carriage driver, Saadun as his mistress until he brings her to Abd al-Rahman's house to work as the new servant.

Rujina's presence in the novel can be summed up by her overwhelming sexual seductiveness. She is the prototype of the oversexed female domestic worker who disturbs the stability of the family. Libidinal drive seems to be the only motive that determines her personality and options. She destroys her own family because of her sexual relationship with a gangster. She then lives with Saadun as a lusty mistress, yet she keeps seducing the rest of the adult, and non-adult, males in the family including Abd al-Rahman himself and his father. Her sexuality is associated with animalistic carnalism. In the Arabic version of the novel, she is described in one line that does not find its way to the English translation: "She is the bawdy hen that allows all cocks to ride her" (160). She is caught having sexual intercourse with Saadun several times by Abd al-Rahman's mother, then by his father too. Rujina, however, manages to exploit this last incident and attempts to seduce her employer. As her partner Saadun rushes to cover his nakedness "Rujina stood in front of him without covering herself... Shawakt Amin's eyes dwelled on Rujina, who was in no hurry to cover herself. She collected her clothes and went to her room, moving provocatively" (ch.56). Rujina in this scene reminds us of Sayida in *The Open Door*, but with extra impudence. Layla, al-Zayyat's protagonist, would have a total heart attack if she watched Rujina filling the physical space with her nakedness and moving her hips in this provocative manner. Rujina succeeds in seducing her employer. The night after that incident, he makes a visit to her room.

The depiction of Rujina's outrageous sexual behavior accelerates in her attitude with Abd al-Rahman, who is in the first stage of his adolescence, new to sexual experience and fascinated by Rujina's naughtiness and openness about it. Noticing the young boy's sexual curiosity, Rujina intensifies the temptation and feeds it with flesh-revealing, provocative kneeling, seductive gazing, and spontaneous touching. Finally, she takes him to her room to relieve his sexual

arousal, but his father ruins the experience as he enters the room shouting at Rujina: “Adulterous woman! First me, and now my son too!? And in the same bed!” (ch.60).

The novel continues to emphasize Rujina’s obscenity, foulness, animalistic sexuality, and tainted beauty. It asserts, as well, that this immoral nature is precisely the source of her appeal for the young Abd al-Rahman. As a child, Abd al-Rahman is traumatized after finding his parents in an intimate moment. He declares his resentment to his mother and accuses her of being a whore claiming virtuousness while doing the horrible act with men, as he says. In the long run, he becomes fond of explicit filth (quote needed) and naked sin, represented in Rujina, and disdains false purity and fake honor, represented in his mother. The novel further complicates this point by linking Abd al-Rahman’s sexual attitude to his thoughts on good and evil and to the way he perceives ethical values. He reckons his family’s wealth and notability as a disgrace that he seeks to disavow. The history of his aristocratic family reminds him of exploitation and slavery, while the filth and misery of servants and working-class people is a sign of their hard work and real suffering. Thus, he deems upper-class morals as artificial and fake, and working-class life as the naked truth. This extends to his notion of dirtiness and cleanliness too: “He contrasted his parents’ clean clothes and elegance with the filthiness of the workers and concluded that their squalor was due to idleness. He felt an odd sexual attraction to what he saw as their mysteries and oddities. He saw them as primitive animalistic creatures, nobler somehow than his sanitary family members” (ch.39). The narrative at one point uses the word “purgative” (ch.39) to describe Abd al-Rahman’s attachment to the lower class community. “The pure woman in Abd al-Rahman’s life was replaced by dissolute women, the innocent woman by experienced women. He abandoned his imagination to obscene feminine traits. Making scullery maids the major players in his life” (ch.39).

There are several references in *Papa Sartre* to the dualism of good/clean women versus bad/dirty women in association with domestic work as outlined by Palmer and Jureidini. Rujina is often portrayed cleaning the marble, sweeping the floor or even bathing. The narrator mentions that she transforms Abd al-Rahman's family house into "an impeccable clean and attractive residence" (ch.34). As Palmer discusses in *Domesticity and Dirt*, domestic workers replace upper-class women in performing tasks related to hygiene and cleaning. They deal with dirt, and that can include material and moral dirt. Rujina's mission of maintaining the hygiene of the house extends to maintaining the purity of upper-class women's bodies. Rujina functions as a sexual relief to all these male characters who desire to play around and experience new things with sex so that other women in the house do not have to deal with these desires. Evidently, upper-class female characters in the novel, especially Abdul-Rahman's mother, is not associated with any seductive sexual behaviors and/or housework. The only time she is caught by her son having sex with her husband, he damns her as a dirty woman. Young Abd al-Rahman, in fact, tells his mother after that incident that she is no different from Rujina. Only Rujina is allowed to deal with dirtiness and remains beautiful and desirable. She is depicted as the promiscuous woman who is desired by all men in the house while being associated with cleaning and house chores.

Opposite of this association of the domestic workers with obscene sexuality in *Papa Sartre*, *Almulhimaat (The Inspirational)* (The Arab Cultural Center- 2011) by the Moroccan author Fatiha Murshid, depicts two other archetypes of domestic workers: the innocent and the dada. It tells two combined stories. One is narrated by a female character, Amina, avenging for years of silence by talking to her husband Omar, who is in a clinical coma as a result of a car accident with his mistress. Amina tells her husband, a successful publisher, about the hidden side

of their marriage, especially about his many affairs that she knew about without his knowing that she knew. She confesses, as well, her only affair, which is the last thing Omar hears, if he can hear at all, before he dies. The second story is narrated by a male character, Idris; Omar's best friend and a well-known writer. With Idris, the novel creates a fetishistic relationship between writing and sex. Idris' inspiration of creativity depends on the sexual drive as he starts the writing instantly after having sex – a behavior that angers his mistresses and often leads them to break up with him. Among these women are a singer, a painter, a literature student, a journalist, and a domestic worker, Zeina.

Zeina is depicted as a sensual, primitive, young and pretty domestic worker. She is a rural woman who cleans Omar's private apartment that has been used by him and Idris to meet their mistresses. Idris first meets Zeina in this apartment while she is kneeling and wiping the floor. He immediately connects Zeina with his childhood fantasies before he learns anything about her and even before he sees her face, "A view of a buttock of an anonymous woman, in front of me, has awakened a hidden instinct desire deep in my guts. All that I wanted is to jump and ride her" (83). Unlike the performativity of seduction exemplified by Rujina and her intentional seductive attitude, Zeina is portrayed as an innocent being. The novel's depiction of Zeina emphasizes the stereotypical image of the naturally sexual attractive domestic worker who can be a typical target for sexual exploitation. She is depicted as a primitive woman with a natural shyness, Amazigh accent, long braided hair, humble appearance and simple clothes (she does not even wear a bra). Everything about Zeina refers to her sensual "nature" including the authentic meals she cooks. Effortlessly and unintentionally, she makes Idris enjoy carnal and primitive pleasures such as using his hand to eat and "riding" Zeina's back: "I was impressed by the way she moves. It

makes you think she is still primitive as a savage deer who had just came out from a jungle. She represents the simplicity of beauty. She is genuine without any cosmetics” (85).

What is more complicated is that at one point Zeina is presented not only as a passive sexual victim of Idris, but as a woman with a sort of agency; she spontaneously encourages him to take the initiating move, which indicates that she is attracted to him. This dynamic implies the narrative’s ambivalent attitude towards Zeina’s sexuality. She is a seductive sexual being only by the virtue of existence, as Strub indicates. Surprisingly for Idris, he is attracted to her as well, although he never thought that he could enjoy sex with a woman who is intellectually lesser than he is. He says: “I used to believe that my inspiration should be one of my readers, my fans. And I supposed she must have a minimum level of intelligence. With Zeina, however, I realized I was wrong” (83). In his other relationships, Idris seems heterosexually sapiosexual. He is attracted to intelligence, success and achievement. Whereas with Zeina, the affair is all about fantasies, dominance, and carnal desires: “I rode her back as I dreamt, while she is wiping the tiles” (87). And if sex with other women is described as a creative and artistic act that induces writing, with Zeina it is described as “animalistic scuffle” (87). Although the relationship is depicted as a consensual one, Idris seems to enjoy his easily achieved dominant role. Furthermore, Zeina is not portrayed as seductive as Rujina, for example. Instead, Zeina is depicted as submissive and an easy target of sexual exploitation. Unlike Idris’ other sexual affairs that require planning and effort, the relationship with Zeina came “naturally,” further associating her with a primitive, innately sexual being (450).

Besides Zeina, there are two more domestic workers in the novel: Amina’s helper Fatima, and Idris’ helper Fatuma. Fatima is an extra, a secondary flat character that falls into the category of signs of class and wealth explained in the first chapter. She is there so the reader recognizes

the social class of Amina's family. She takes care of the grandmother and the readers barely know anything about her. Fatuma, on the other hand, represents the old, motherly domestic worker who is asexualized and devoid of intimate desires. She lives with Idris in his apartment and provides him with care as his wife taught her before the wife dies. Fatuma is in her sixties when she first appears in the novel. She is characterized by her maternal tenderness "that makes you feel as if she is one of your family members" (Murshid 41). For Idris, she is more than a servant; she is a friend and the only person who cares for him. One sign of the special relationship between these two characters is that Idris asks Fatuma to share meals on the same table with him to ease his loneliness, which is unusual among employer/servant relationships. The novel devotes a full chapter to recall Fatuma's story from her childhood until she arrives to Idris' house. When she leaves for pilgrimage, Idris feels the longing for her and emptiness she left in his life, a "feeling that exceeds his material needs for her services" (165).

Fatuma is an exemplary model for the character of the nanny/dada, the familiar prototype in Arabic cinema and popular culture (Abdulrahim). Umm Hanafi in Mahfooz's *Trilogy* is an ideal model of this character. In the golden age of Egyptian Cinema (1940s-1960s) Thuraya Fakhri, the Lebanese actress, is one of the most popular figures who also performs this role (Khalid). The character features an old, rural domestic worker who is faithful, content, loved, and has maternal devotion towards her employers and their children. The character of dada is very similar to the widely known images in American history of the mammy; the Black enslaved woman taking care of white children, with specific physical features characterizing her, such as the signature wide smile, white shining teeth, and extremely large breasts and buttocks. The mammy, like the Arabic dada, is also funny, naive, and has a comic trait. These qualities are significant to this category because they justify the unjust situation of servants and contribute to

maintaining the status quo (Collins 72). This tendency of ‘cultural-washing’ servitude and class division is clearly represented in portraying the character of Fatuma in *Almulhimat*. The narrator repeatedly asserts that Fatuma is a special companion for Idris, such that he asks her to share meals with him. It seems like this rhetoric is one way for Idris to mitigate his attitude towards other women in his life. That is, the narrative uses Fatuma and her asexualized character as an equalizer for what appears to be a contamination of the other intimate relationships outside, as if her chastity symbolizes the purity of the home; the last refuge of innocence and purity. Evidently, the only time Fatuma leaves Idris’ house is when she goes to pilgrimage, which signifies purifying oneself from sins.

Rujina, Zeina, and Fatuma represent the three archetypes of domestic workers in contemporary Arabic novels. Rujina is the seductive, promiscuous whore, while Zeina is the innocent, naive sexual target. Fatuma, on the other hand, is the faithful, content *dada* who serves as a motherly figure towards the other characters.

### 3. Intersectionality and Intimacy

In addition to the three archetypes of domestic workers, the intimacy and sexual relationships that involve domestic workers are equally overwhelming in texts that tackle servitude and domesticity. These relationships in contemporary Arabic fiction are conceived as a source of disturbance and violation to the established structure. Their representation always includes elements of class, race, and gender, complicating the relationships between the characters beyond the personal love story. I will investigate intersectional identities within the intimate sphere, bearing in mind the interracial and cross-class and gender dynamics among the characters. I argue in this section that the underprivileged enslaved women and domestic workers work around these power dynamics to be in their favor by re-appropriating the sexual



relationship as a tool of empowerment. However, it is important to note that this empowerment is not deemed as a utopian salvation that may uplift these women characters from their struggles. Instead, it is limited and time-bound. The narrative form does not seem to offer the capacity of hope, and thus, it gets trapped in hyper-realism instead of trying to provide a utopian imagination to break away from the deadlock of reality. My analysis will include several texts that depict interracial cross-class and gender relationships such as: *Thaman al-Mulh*, *Zarayib al-Abeed*, and *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa*. Intersectionality is crucial to the understanding of the depiction of domestic workers' sexuality, as will be revealed in the analysis.

Interestingly, *Price of the Salt* introduces two interracial sexual relationships including female and male domestic workers in two successive chapters. The first is the sexual liaison between Moza, the young widowed mistress, and her Black enslaved male Salim, followed by the relationship between Abda, the Black enslaved female and her sweetheart Barakat, the rich young man who is the son of the *imam* of the mosque. Several gestures of race, gender and class differentiations are implied in these two stories. The sexuality of these characters is deemed as a product of this socio-economic structure and a result of it. In both relationships, the sexuality of the Black domestic worker characters, whether male or female, is described as excessive. And while the non-Black, upper-class male sexuality is depicted as more civilized, sentimental, and intimate, the women of the same upper social strata who have an affair with a Black enslaved person is portrayed as a lustful female who has no control over her desires.

Moza is the second owner of Abda. After Moza's rich husband passes away, leaving her with a huge fortune, she lives in a big house with her unmarried sister and a couple of enslaved men and women. She never finds another husband despite her beauty and liveliness. Thus, Moza initiates a sexual relationship with her handsome Black servant Salim to satisfy her sexual needs

that, according to her other servants, become unquenchable after her widowhood. This relationship is depicted by the narrator, Abda in this case, as a purely erotic one. As she describes the sexual liaison between Salim and Moza, Abda first mentions that she hears “unknown sounds” and “strange noises” from Moza’s bedroom (158). These expressions suggest that what is about to be described, the interracial sex involving light-skinned mistress and Black enslaved man, is an exotic and savage act. The voices are strange and inapprehensible, alluding to the ways in which Black people’s languages are described in pre-modern Arabic texts as barbaric (Quiet). Although Abda is not in the room to witness, she describes a “loud sex party” (161), that makes Moza scream while “Salim was on top of her, shaking her roughly so she feels his virility, to which she seems to have been surrendering for a long time. The minutes went fast and Moza’s lust went crazier and hungry for the man, and her moans rang out” (160). Moza’s sexual submission to her enslaved man becomes a subject of derision by the other servants who describe her as sex crazed. The disturbing mistress/slave sexual affair has a deep root in Arabo-Persian culture that reflects the fear and contempt of both women and Black men’s sexuality. The epic collection of tales, *The Thousand Nights and One Night* is built around a frame story of an adulterous queen who has sex with a Black enslaved man in the palace garden, and the tales include a wide range of stories about rampant sexual relations between mistresses and Black enslaved men. One of the fundamental themes of the collection is the insatiable lust of women and their desire for aggressive sex, large penises, and practice of promiscuity and bestiality. This uncontrollable sexuality of women is matched by the sexual prowess of enslaved Black men. Black enslaved men's sexuality is portrayed as an addictive disease, linked to madness and zoophilia and it can affect women’s physical and mental health (Cite). In *The King’s Daughter and the Ape* tale, for instance, the woman who sleeps with a Black enslaved man, then with an

ape to get rid of her lust for the Black man, becomes infected with two worms, a Black worm – which feeds on having sex with the Black slave, and a yellow one, which feeds on having sex with the ape. She is cured by a potion made by an old woman and by having sex with a *normal* man who marries her to save her from these harmful practices. Addiction to sex with Black men and worms that can inflict light-skinned people when they have sex with them, still finds its way to current cultural production and even daily life conversations. The mix of lusty women and sex-fiends Black men becomes a major threat to the stability of the social system, the structure of power, and to the authority of dominant fairer-skinned men. Such inexorable sexuality is often depicted as the basic motive to violate socio-economic structures. The fear that Black men's sexuality would beguile women and consequently enable them to control their bodies is offset in literature by the portrayal of Black eunuchs whose job is to guard the chastity of women belonging to elite men. This is a theme that the narrative lightly touches when it mentions that Moza spreads the rumor that Salim is castrated, to dispel suspicions about their sexual affair. The erotic relationship between Salim and Moza embodies a great deal of these historical and cultural references. Moza is perceived as a promiscuous woman who has surrendered to her slave, and Salim is characterized by his sexual efficiency as a typical Black enslaved man; a tall, strong man, with a hyper-masculine body, “He was an unmistakable man, especially with his extraordinary power. Even the shape of his face does not look like those of slaves who have snotty noses and dark black skin. One can say that he is a slave who is not far from handsomeness” (159).

Barakat, on the other hand, is characterized by his white-standard beauty and tenderness. His lightness of skin is precisely what attracts Abda, the Black enslaved young woman who does not seem to find Blackness beautiful, “It was his look that drew me to him, frankly. Most of the

light-skinned men I've seen here are close to brown color. But he was so white, so clean that I smelled his perfume from afar. His face is bright and has a thick mustache that increases his handsomeness. His eyes are wide as if they were the eyes of a woman. His nose is tiny and his hair is soft" (139). Barakat's attractiveness and masculinity emerge here as a product of his class and color. This depiction contrasts with the hypersexualized Salim and his relationship with Moza. Salim never speaks but with "strange sounds," whereas Barakat talks about love, desires, and shares stories with Abda. Although his relationship with Abda is based on sex too, Barakat is represented as a gentle and sweet partner. The chosen glossary for this relationship is essentially different from that of the wild sensuality of Moza and Salim's relationship. With Barakat, it is a combination of romance, intimacy, and love making. In their first sexual liaison, which happens in their first private meeting, Barakat treats Abda with respect and tenderness. She says, "He holds my hands and cuddled me tightly and warmly that he makes me let him do whatever he wants without any resistance" (166). Abda describes her feeling towards him as "the ecstasy of love," and the sexual contact between them as nurturing the body with love (167). As a civil gesture, he makes sure she is physically satisfied, asking her if she likes the experience. Abda's sexuality, however, is described as a lustful and animalistic one, just like Salim's. She uses the word "*shabaq*" to describe her sexual nature, a word that is associated in Arabic with pure sexual instinct and that is stripped from any emotional connection.

On the other end of the spectrum, these interracial and cross-class relationships are deemed as a tool of empowerment for domestics, especially when they are treated with warmth and respect by their upper-class lovers. In *Thaman al-Mulh*, Abda's sexual relationship with Barakat seems to enhance her self-confidence. Being flirted with by an upper-class light-skinned man makes her feel beautiful and desired. Servitude chain loosens up as she starts dating him.

She speaks about liberation and feeling like a normal woman because of their relationship, such that she is encouraged to gain her liberty, “For the first time, I felt that slaves have pleasures just like masters and that a female slave is like the rest of women in the world. Desire is inherent in them but they are often wretched people and cannot do what they please” (al-Bassam 166). The end of this relationship, however, is not optimistic, as Abda realizes that the established classifications are more rigid than what she thought. The end of the novel is open but has no sense of hope regarding this affair.

A similar example to Abda and Barakat’s relationship is Ta’weeda and Muhammad in *Zarayib al-Abeed*. “Love makes me equal to him,” is the passionate narrative that Ta’weeda provides about her relationship with her master Muhammad. Ta’weeda speaks to her friend about the compassionate treatment she receives from her lover and the joy she experiences with him, “I no longer feel that I am just his slave-woman [*jaryia*] who pleases him. I enjoy him too. And this divine equality of feelings makes me fully convinced that he and I are one. In love, he is more a slave to me like any other slave. He is my man and not my master” (Bin Shatwan 192). When Ta’weeda tells Muhammad she is pregnant with his child and asks whether he wants her to abort it, he responds, “It is my child and I will carry it to the mosque so everyone may be informed it is mine and my mistress’ and that I am her obedient slave” (198). Master Muhammad kneels and kisses her navel. She comments as she is telling her friend about this memory, “Masters won’t kneel to their servants unless they are truly in love with them” (199).

Needless to mention, this love story outrages Muhammad’s family and causes a state of alert in the household. The sexual relationship itself is not the major problem since Ta’weeda is an enslaved woman and no one can prevent Muhammad from having sex with his *jaryia*. Procreation and miscegenation are the danger that preoccupies the mother and the wife’s minds

and motivates them to conspire against Ta'weeda. The mother tricks Ta'weeda to abort her pregnancy twice. When her daughter tries to prevent her from doing so, the mother comments, "Forget I allow a son of a Black slave to carry the family's name. That is impossible. He can make love to her, it is God's way in his creation. But to have an offspring with her, this will not happen as long as I am alive" (202). The expected child is a huge threat to the balance of power and the structure of the socio-economic establishment. Having a child from an enslaved woman means that she will be freed from slavery because she will be considered *'umm al-walad*, a mother of free children. It also means that the child will inherit his/her father's property, which will cause a disturbance to the structure of classes and the distribution of wealth and resources. The death of the two fetuses and one born baby of Muhammad and Ta'weeda is, thus, a symbolic sign of the lack of hope for such scenario in this text.

Other texts, such as Samar Yazbek's *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* seek to test more possibilities of power relations in domestic spheres. The novel creates a ground in where the balance of power might be disturbed. Temporarily, the servant is able to take over and control her employer's sexuality, using her own abused body as a tool of manipulation and resistance. *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* is a short novel first published in Arabic 2008 and set in pre-revolution Damascus. It deals with women's sexuality, same-sex sexuality, class differences, domestic violence, and domestic work. The narrative moves between upper-upper-class and dirty-poor-class of Syrian society. *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* has received remarkable critical attention, especially after its translation into English, as it has been quoted extensively in research dealing with homosexuality in Arabic literature (Gaurdi). It is highly celebrated, as well, for its abstract style, magical realism, and cinematic feel. *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* centers on the lives of, and the sexual relationship between, two women: Hanan al-Hashimi, an extremely rich young woman trapped in an unsatisfactory marriage to her

old cousin, and her servant Aliyah who, as a girl, was given by her father to Hanan's family as a domestic servant in exchange for money. The opening moment in the novel is the climax moment of the plot as Hanan discovers the sexual affair between her servant (and her own lover) Aliyah and her husband Anwar. The time of the narrative freezes at this moment, and no more than a few hours actually transpire during the present time of narrative, but the story line goes twenty years back and few hours forward through Hanan and Aliyah's stream of consciousness and the flow of their thoughts around that central moment. In short chapters, narrated interchangeably between the two main protagonists, the novel takes the reader to the affluent bourgeoisie life, its norms and restrictions, through Hanan's childhood and adolescence, juxtaposed with the life of poverty, violence, and struggle for survival in slums where Aliyah spends her wretched childhood. The narrative tackles the suffocating social conventions that affect women of both social classes. Hanan, although belonging to a wealthy family, suffers from loneliness, and the constraints of upper-class community. Her father dies young and her mother is a cold human being who never shows any affection. Hanan is raised to be obedient to the familial and social order. Her family decides to marry her off to her recently-divorced cousin whom Hanan considers as an older brother. Despite her total rejection of this marriage, she could not stop this deal that is arranged to have an heir to the family, as Anwar's first marriage fails to fulfill that demand. Such an incident illustrates one of the sufferings of women in upper-class communities. That is, they are treated as a means of preserving family property. The novel shows how this marriage is harmful even for Anwar who carries parental feelings towards Hanan. Hanan who seems to have homosexual desire since childhood, copes with this unwanted marriage through more desired sexual relationships with adult women, until she meets the ten-year-old Aliyah and initiates a love/hate sexual relationship with her. Aliyah, coming from one

of the most dangerous and poor slums in one of Damascus villages, where she endures hideous domestic and public violence, rape, and poverty, finds a form of salvation with her employer. When Hanan first approaches her, Aliyah seems lost yet subdued to Hanan. Soon after, Aliyah starts to feel loved and empowered by this relationship. She realizes what power her body has over Hanan. She quickly learns how to master the skills of sex and how to satisfy her mistress, “Aliyah had taken her own existence and her own self-confidence from where she had found it: within Hanan’s body. Before that, she was nothing. After all, wasn’t she now capable of making such a rich, beautiful woman happy?” (94).

The narrative inserts a lexicon of dominant/submissive pattern to depict Hanan and Aliyah’s relationship. Aliyah begins to talk about sovereignty, crown, throne and kingdom versus Hanan’s vocabulary of attraction, falling, submission, and captivity. This situation allows a relative class mobility for Aliyah. Her mistress’ sexual habits and demands enable her to enjoy the lavish lifestyle of rich people: fancy lingerie, elaborate bathing with body-care products, besides living in a separate decent bedroom. Yet every morning, things go back to their order. The lady returns to her position and the servant returns to her place. When Aliyah believes she is in control of her mistress’ nightlife, Hanan quickly fixes the hierarchical relation and puts things in order. One night Aliyah falls asleep in Hanan’s bed after hectic sex. The mistress angrily wakes her up the next morning and shouts at her, “How could you have let yourself stay in my bed until morning?” (108). This moment is a turning point in the relationship between the two women. Aliyah feels insulted and vengeful. As a reaction to that insult, she seduces Anwar. At the same time, her sexual relationship with Hanan begins to take a violent course. The lady wakes up one night to find Aliyah in her husband’s bed. She expels Aliyah from the house after



an outburst of anger. The novel ends as Hanan runs to look for Aliyah after spending few hours thinking of their relationship.

Despite this sense of empowerment, some scholars argue that the discourse of the novel is still heteronormative. Regarding homosexuality, *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* does not break with heteronormative discourses although its major theme is a lesbian relationships (Guardi). Although the narrative grants Aliyah a temporary salvation or false sovereignty through sexual intercourse with her mistress, the fact remains that she is sexually exploited and abused by both Hanan and her husband. Aliyah's homosexuality does not come as a personal orientation as much as a submissive attitude to her mistress while she was, in effect, an enslaved child, with no choice but to surrender to her mistress' desires. Further, Hanan does not seem to be in love with Aliyah even though she seems to be very fond of her. Eventually, Hanan's homosexuality appears as an effect of a childhood memory as she was molested in the women's public bathing house (*hammam*). On the other hand, she initiates these intimate relationships with women as a vindication against her husband whom she was forced to marry (Guardi 21). Guardi argues that the homosexual intercourse in *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* is "perpetuating a sexual patriarchal stereotype" since it is "presented as a power relationship between the master and the black servant" (20). While Aliya is not Black, she is described as having "dark" skin as well as extremely low class status; thus she occupies the lowest position in the social hierarchy portrayed in the novel. The narrative also hints several times to the stereotypical animalistic nature of servants and darker-skinned people's sexuality as one more signifier of its heteronormative discourse, "For Hanan, the girl's animality was a source of attraction. She would savour the touch of her fingers as they played on her back drawing pictures and feel a strange sensation at the sight of the servant's dark skin against her own soft white flesh" (59). There is certainly a preconceived notion on Aliyah's

sexuality as a dark-skinned servant in this passage. Her “wildness” sexuality seems related to her skin color.

Despite its heteronormativity, however, the novel allows Aliyah to disturb class boundaries. Regarding class mobility and balancing the game of power, Aliyah seems to be able to shake that balance within the domestic sphere, especially after she manipulates Anwar to her game too. She uses her body and sexuality, although they have been used against her, to change the rules of the game. At one point, it seems as if she is the one individual who takes over and controls everyone else’s body, “Now she was capable of devouring men and women equally. With the same desire and strength... that was exactly what she had done until the mistress became the pawn of her desire and the master a slave to his servant’s game. She had turned the grand house into her own palace where others could be made to move according to her will” (107).

It is worth noticing that the narrative also employs the trope of *The One Thousand Nights* and *One Night* as Aliyah’s inspirational instrument. Early as she enters al-Hashimi’s house, Aliyah becomes obsessed with their library. She spends hours reading, drawing the stories she imagines, and writing her memories until she is discovered and banned from doing so, but her passion towards reading, writing, and drawing never stops. She starts hiding books and reading them in her room. Her favorite book is the book of Scheherazade. She becomes fascinated by the personality of Scheherazade. Later she uses the skills she acquires through reading Scheherazade’s book in her foreplays with Hanan. Is it a coincidence that the only two items she takes when she is expelled from Hanan’s house is this book and the only photo she has of herself? This choice suggests that this book has become part of Aliyah’s identity. Scheherazade is Aliyah’s inspiration to manipulate her mistress and master and to guarantee her survival in the

midst of dangers. The trope of Scheherazade is ultimately one of the most metaphorical instruments of women's survival in Arabic narrative. It is as if many women who fear the anxiety of erasure find refuge under Scheherazade's overcoat.

Besides the depiction of stereotypical roles of domestic workers within the three categories of the whore, the innocent, and the dada, there is an interaction that goes beyond the dual/binary notion of the abused/abuser dynamic in these texts. There is a focus on the intimate sexual relations between female servants and their employers that reveals a rich ground for discussing intersectional struggles. These relationships are mostly viewed in the societies depicted in these novels as subversive relations and a source of contamination that need to be stopped. The reason behind the rejection of such relations is not related to individual or personal characteristics. Instead, it is a systematic rejection that refuses crossing between class structures. Cross-class and interracial sexual relations between masters and female servants are represented in some cases as a tool of class mobility that violates the established social structure.

*Papa Sartre* by Ali Badr, *al-Mulhimaat* by Fatima Murshid, *Thaman al-Mulh* by Khaled al-Bassam, *Zarayib al-Abeed* by Najawa bin Shatwan, and *Ra'ehat al Qirfa* by Samar Yazbek offer portrayals of domestic workers with rich backstories. These novels bring to the fore questions of the simultaneously insider/outsider status of domestic workers in the family space, as well as metaphorical paradoxes of clean/dirty. The sexuality of domestic workers is at the crux of both these oppositions. One set of stock characters contrasts the seductress with the innocent domestic worker, who both are sexual beings, while a third stock character, the dada, is asexualized. Complex portrayals of sexuality include the possibility of it being utilized by the domestic worker as an avenue of empowerment, although the long view is not typically optimistic for changing structural oppression through this method, in the novels examined.

The contemporary Arabic novels in this chapter provide a revision of the prevailing standardized social norms which consider sexuality as a product of people's class, gender, and color, and objectify domestic workers as sexual beings. Many of the novels in this chapter depict the hardships that these characters endure for their efforts to challenge structural class, gender, and color boundaries. This depiction indicates a shift in the awareness and concerns of Arab writers, as these novels begin to question structures oppression and exploitation and attempt to tackle them within the broader concept of intersectionality.

## Conclusion

This is a continuous project on the representations of domestic workers in modern Arabic literature. In this volume, I have examined these representations in a number of Arabic mid-century and contemporary novels using feminism and intersectionality as my overarching framework. I have employed several scholarships of feminism, such as Marxist feminism and postcolonial feminism as the theoretical framework to examine the discourse on the working-class women in the Arabic narrative. The initial assumption of this study is that there is a noticeable invisibility of domestic workers in these novels. Arabic fiction carries a long tradition of marginalizing these groups, which goes back to the period of the mid-century as shown in the analysis of icon novels in the first chapter. If they find their way to a text, domestic workers are typically ahistorical figures whose subjectivity is not centered in the narrative. Arabic literature is not an exception in this phenomenon, English literature has a long tradition, as well, of underrepresenting working-class people and treating them in the same manner, according to Robbins in his foundation book *The Servant's Hand*. Robbins points out that what makes it difficult for scholars to analyze working-class characters in English novels is not only their invisibility, but also the flatness and repetitive nature of these characters in such a way that they have no appeal to critics. Robbins reads this literary production by seeking out the ideological roots from which these representations grow while seeking to reveal the utopian vision hidden in this body of literature.

Following the framework of Robbins of exploring the significations of the absence and the ways of literary treatments of working-class groups, I have applied several theoretical tools to read the significations of both the invisibility and the appearance of female domestic workers in Arabic fiction. Barthe's structural analysis to narrative and Eco's concepts of the reader-

response assessed in reading these significations. While Eco addresses the role of the reader in filling the gaps and unsayable parts of the narrative, Barthe proposes that “art is a pure system” that does not acknowledge any “wasted units,” no matter “how long, loose, or tenuous the threads which link them to one of the levels of the story” (245). In light of these theories, I traced three functionalities of domestic workers in Mahfouz’ *Trilogy* and other icon texts. Domestic workers in these texts are either non-verbal elements that function as signs of wealth and class, or they represent the loyal servant whose function is to mitigate the burden of guilt for upper-class people, and finally, they represent the unheard subaltern characters. Further, in Sha’rawi’s memories, working-class people function as the Other; the opposite body that sharpens up the quality of upper-class people, or “the foil that brings out the “elegance” of the jewel . . . the indistinct “background that sets the upper-class foreground in sharper relief” (Robbins 3). A similar function is demonstrated in *The Open Door* regarding body politics as domestic workers are set in contrast to middle-class women. While middle-class women are surrounded by fundamentals that impose middle-class ethics of modesty and courtesy, female domestic workers are deemed as seductive, vulgar, and immoral characters due to the nature of their roles and status that require living with stranger families and being exposed to strange males. This situation qualifies female domestic workers to become the easiest sexual relief target. These novels also reveal the Marxist and feminist notions of the gender division of labor as well as class tension among female characters.

More recent novels give more space to marginalized groups including domestic workers. In many contemporary fictional texts analyzed in the second and third chapters, I have noticed that the images of domestic workers have developed into more mature characters that function as cardinal units of the narrative and not only as extras, subaltern, or signs of wealth. The marginal

social space no longer means marginal fictional spaces in contemporary texts as a result of the growing awareness of human rights and issues of racism, sexism, and intersectionality. Many novels aim to provide a revision of the previous era when literature overlooked subjects of slavery and characters of working-class communities. The second chapter, devoted to discussing the representation of slavery in contemporary Arabic literature, revealed that the new generation of Arab writers begin to tackle controversial matters that older generation tend to avoid as an attempt to maintain the unified national voice. Slavery and anti-Black racism are among these subjects that contemporary novels expose and target with criticism. Novels of this chapter often treat these two subjects as linked to each other and showcase how color, gender, and class can form a cluster of identities that are placed in the lower social strata. The oppression of these characters is multi-faceted and multi-layered. Narrative discourse in this chapter reveals resistance to social norms and subjugation and gives enslaved and Black female characters more space for resistance. The analysis reveals, however, that even these novels that are written with the intention to target anti-Black racism barely eliminates subtle racism. This color prejudice is rooted in the Arab consciousness despite the influence of Islamic ideals that call for the renunciation of bigotry and racism. Black people are stereotyped to be unpleasant looking, hyper-sexualized, and easily identified with slavery by the virtue of their color.

The sexuality of domestic workers is further complicated in contemporary Arabic fiction. I have discussed some historical and legal issues regarding servants and *jawari* in Muslims and Arab culture, as well as cultural notions related to domestic work such as the notion of purity and contamination as explained by Phyllis Palmer. Palmer proposes that household are spheres for “good” women who are associated with purity and cleanliness while the chores they perform are associated with dirt. Thus, the function of domestic workers is to take these dirty duties,

including sexual ones, away from upper-class women. Dominant stereotypes of female domestic workers, such as the dichotomy of the seductive/ the victim, and the motherly asexualized figures, are still popular in this body of literature. However, more vibrant and complicated representations of domestic workers' sexuality begin to appear too. Sexuality is represented in these novels as a product of characters' gender, class, and color. However, the narrative reveals more potential in sexual relations between domestic workers and their employers. Exploitation and abuse exist, but intimacy and love exist too. Further, cross-class sexual relationships are perceived as a tool of empowerment. Sexual liaison with their upper-class employers is the tool for female domestic workers for class mobility. However, most of these literary texts show no utopian vision as these relationships rarely succeed in upgrading the class of domestic worker characters due to the rigid systematic class structure. The novel tackles how interracial sexual relationships are depicted as disturbing affairs to the socio-economic establishment and reflects the fear of such relationships.

The next volume of this project will be devoted to analyzing the literary depiction of the different and more recent category of domestic workers, which is the expatriate domestics that begin to replace older forms of servitude in several Arab countries during the transformations in the seventies and eighties of the last century. I will use several texts such as Saud al-Sanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk* (2015), Huda Hamad's *She, Who Count Stairs* (2014), Hazim Saqghiyah's *I am Kumary from Siri Lanka* (2013), Muhammad Tunji's *Diary of a Maid in the Gulf* (2008), Radwa Ashour's *The Woman from Tantoura (al-Tantooriyah)* (2014), and Rasheed al-Daif's *Hirrat Sikirida* (2014) to examine how Arab writers treat this figure and issues associated with it such as class, gender, nationality, and language. The framework for this volume will be the Marxist and transnational feminism in order to investigate conditions of postmodernity,



globalization, and multinational corporations that are all involved in creating this phenomenon of migrant domestic labor.

### End Notes

1. Mahfouz depicts the transformation in the wife's role and personality as women start to work and earn in public in the third part of the novel.

2. A modified statement from the introduction of Amina Sa'id to the Dar al-Hilal publication of *Muthakkirati*. Quoted in Mohja Kahf: "Packaging Huda" (162).

3. Although this text is an autobiography and it used to be read as historical document, scholars such as Mohja Kahf argues that it can still be read as a type of narrative and literature. Kahf explains that we may view *Muthakkirati* under the lens of postmodernist theory that loosens strict boundaries between genres, or we could consider the Arabic understanding of *Adab*/ literature that is wider and more modest than the transcendental/ elite modern western concept. In that sense, we can read this text as a contribution to the modern Arabic corpus of autobiographical narrative and analyze it as a literary text (Kahf, "Huda Sha'rawi" 53-54).

4. This situation, after all, is not an exception in the history of feminist movements. At its early waves, western feminism also went through similar circumstances and patterns as it was monolithic in its nature, and it centered on European white upper and middle-class women whom their priorities were different from women of color or with less social and economic privileges. It was until the period between the second and third waves of feminism (70s- 90s of the twentieth century) when multiple trends of feminism such as Black, Chicana, Marxist, and postcolonial feminism appeared and called for embracing multiculturalism and diversity.

5. Such comments that expose Sha'rawi's class bias are excluded from the English translation so that Sha'rawi's character would fit with the western mood of reception. She was meant to be introduced to the Anglophonic reader as the brave feminist model who fights for all women's rights. Such an image would be affected by this class biases and thus it was smoothed

in the English translation. For similar reasons, several chapters of *Muthakkirati* focusing on Sha'rawi's childhood, family's and father's pride are modified in the translation in a way that "frame" her as a typical rebellious, escapee, victim woman who cuts off with her society's traditions in order to suit the Western readership. For more details regarding the English translation and how it is modified to fit the anglophonic environment, the reader may review Mohja Kahf's "Packaging "Huda".

6. In the Arabic version, the word used here is "I hated". The translation "I didn't like" seems to be for the purpose of smoothen Sha'rawi's classist tone.

7. While the armed conflict and direct colonization is over in many Arab countries - with the exception of Palestine- economic control and neo-colonialism are still present in the Arab region.

8. Hunwick mentions that this usage appeared in the seventeenth century without further explanation (xix).

9. Enslaved people in Arabic-speaking-world in the nineteenth century were brought from different areas and belong to different ethnicities. There were white and Black slaves. The whites were mostly brought from Georgia and Circassia. Most of them fled their homeland as a result of the Russian empire conquests of the Caucasus in the nineteenth century (Hilal 1-2). In his book *Slaves in Egypt in the Nineteenth Century* Emad Hilal points out that slaves were brought to Egypt in several ways: they were either kidnapped, taking as hostages of wars, or purchased in slaves markets (2). Circassian Females were brought to ruler families for the sake of providing them with pretty women (3). Even after the ban of trading slaves in the middle of the nineteenth century (1857), slaves merchants continued to smuggle these women from Turkey and other surrounding regions and sell them to affluent families in Egypt and Levant (4). Since

the beginning of the Ottoman era, slavery has become one of the main commodities exported by Sudan to Egypt. However, at the end of the Ottoman era slave trade was blocked as part of the general collapse of the empire and due to conflicts between the Mamluk princes who inherited the Ottoman state (Hilal 22). Under the rule of Muhammad Ali enslaved individuals were brought from three main areas in Sudan: Darfur, Sanar, Kordofan and were mainly worked as enslaved soldiers in the Ali's military. Some historians believe that the desire to import more enslaved people to help with the mission of building the modern state was one of the most important reasons that prompted Mohamed Ali to invade Sudan. (Hilal 23-25).

10. Family and marriage system in the nineteenth century varies in many Arab countries and includes different forms of marriage and concubinage. Some of these forms are formal, legitimate, and public and some are less formal and less 'legitimate'. Some families have major wife or wives and minor, secondary, concubine and slave wives too (Cuno 77-98).

11. Historians such as Emad Hilal and Lewis indicate that white enslaved females were the most expensive and were usually owned by wealthy families. They are mainly used for sexual purposes and often end up as wives or concubines to their masters. Abyssinians, who are favored for their deep brown or bronze complexion, are considerably different from white and Black groups. Lewis mentions that Abyssinians think of themselves as "they differ so little from white people that they cannot be persuaded to act as servant" (83). The Black enslaved females, on the other side feel the same towards the Abyssinians, but they are more obedient and willing to perform house chores (83)

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